



Ranging from South America to Africa and Italy, Christopher Cardew's inspirational novel explores the extremes of nature, and the extremes which men go to in order to survive, find a niche in life and attain personal redemption.

A web of dramatic events is drawn together, almost miraculously, by the appearance of Pietro, a young orphan from a favela in Rio de Janeiro, whose luminous presence touches all who meet him – both in everyday life and in the unseen world of the spirit.

Hints of Robert Louis Stevenson and Ernest Hemingway add high adventure to this saga of the sea and the changing land. The author's brilliant depiction of characters in crisis, and his keen psychological insight, make *Pietro* a highly rewarding read.


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PIETRO

CHRISTOPHER V CARDEW



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Also by the author:

My Kingdom for a Dream

Pellafino

The Legend of the Cross

PIETRO

Christopher V Cardew

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PIETRO

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One:
The Moving Finger Writes...
(Omar Khayyam)

Henry Curtis felt desperately alone as he walked the streets in the lower suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. It was well past midday, and he had been walking almost aimlessly for several hours, wandering from street to park to street, striving to tire his body and subdue the sharp memory of Mary's lovely self and smiling face. She was a part of himself, so entwined were their hearts and minds. Filled with such living memories, he could not put aside the most vivid and poignant time when she had died in his arms on that sparkling morning in May; a poor frail figure, her breathing scarcely audible.

Yet, he thought, it is better by far to have loved and lost, if only to this world, than never to have loved at all.

The bittersweet memories flooded in again and yet again. With vivid and relentless clarity he visualised the scene as her end neared on that perfect dawn morning; the drifting, ground-hugging mist had seemed alive, reaching up with curling, beckoning fingers. He had lifted her in his arms so she could see over the balcony into the garden she had created, over to the golden land hazing into the distance. The sun's rays had shot lances of brilliance through the open doors; but one chosen ray, dappled through the leaves of a tree, came slowly to rest like a caress on her dear face. Mary had looked up at him with an exquisite smile that flew like an arrow deep into his inner self; her glorious eyes shone for a moment; then with a gentle sigh she was gone, and with her going his heart broke, and he had wept silently and alone.

Mary was then forty-seven years of age, while Henry was fifty-eight. During the nearly twenty-nine years they had been married, the passage of time had swept by in a wonder of activity, harmony and beauty; for they were individual and yet one, both here and beyond.

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He remembered only too well how a mortal injury had brought about her death: between a straggle of acacia trees, they had been riding over the African plains, rolling away to the immensity of Mount Kilimanjaro floating hazily in the distance. The early morning air was crisp and sparkling. It was a magnificent panorama, redolent of the Africa in which they had both lived and loved for many years, for with all its raw beauty and cruelties it was an integral part of them both.

Then, with incredible speed and suddenness, in a blur of sleek spotted fur, a startled leopard had leapt from the bole of a tree they were nearing, and streaked past in front of the trotting horses. Mary's had reared up, wild with shock and terror. She was thrown to the ground, while in its fear her horse had turned aside over her prone body, then landed stiffly, its right foreleg driving into her side. Curtis had fought to grasp her horse's reins, but his own powerful beast had stiffened in shock, leaving him unable to move the one to grasp the other. He blamed himself, yet in fact the whole sequence of events had taken place so swiftly that no one could have done more.

Mary had screamed once before passing into unconsciousness. With great care Henry had picked her up and carried her nearly three miles back to their home, where he laid her on their bed. He dared not leave her, so rang a young neighbour of theirs, who drove like fury to fetch the nearest doctor. An hour later a doctor arrived, one who was well known to them: at that time the telephone lines were localised, serving less than a dozen homes over quite a wide area, with no link to either Arusha or Moshi.

After examining her, the doctor's view had been that she must not on any account be moved for the time being, for while the horse's hoof had broken two of her lower ribs, far more serious was Mary's badly bruised left kidney. He was reluctant to say how serious he considered the damage to be; but on being pressed, he advised Henry not to raise his hopes, for there were almost certainly further complications. He was obviously worried and stayed for some time, until it became increasingly plain that he could do no more. On leaving he handed Henry a small parcel of drugs, with some morphine for emergencies, and an assurance that he would call again in a few days to see if she could be moved to Nairobi.

That day never came, for although the doctor called twice within the next two weeks, it was clear that any attempt to move Mary over the rough terrain to the airport at Arusha would bring on severe internal bleeding: the damage was plainly too great for her to be flown to Nairobi. They understood, but never spoke of death as a probable end, only as the start of a new beginning.

For a while Mary drifted in and out of consciousness, fortunately with little pain, for which Henry had been grateful, even though he knew this may not have been a good sign. About a week later, she declared herself better and got out of bed, only to collapse into his arms. Even so, her determination drove her to walk a few steps unaided, and then for slightly longer; yet she was visibly weakening. In his helplessness, each day passed slowly for Henry, his self-control taxed to the limit, unable to influence the inexorable passage of destiny.

With this and various other signs, about which he had been forewarned by the doctor, Henry was forced to accept that Mary's condition was incurable within the bounds of the simple medical aid available locally – and probably beyond. Mary knew she could not hold on for long. But those who have lived and worked in Africa, particularly those close to nature, view death more naturally, and rarely have the same fear of it as do many westerners: life and death are always close companions; it is the loss that is so hard to bear for the surviving partner. They were both deeply steeped in this truth; and knowing it, Mary herself brushed the matter aside as far as she could, and lived every remaining moment of her life with Henry – her beloved, who had found her by chance in the heart of Africa.

His mind blurred over the following days. Lucy, their lovely happily married daughter, flew down from Nairobi to be with them both. The days that followed were the happiest that Mary had known since the accident; there was no pain now, only a numbness.

With nothing left to cloud her mind, her deepest concern was for Henry, from whose side she knew she must be parted, even if only for his remaining time on this Earth. This concern was so strong in Mary, that her mental vitality rallied her flagging body for a few days. Her real pain was in having to leave Henry to live

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on alone; they had always been so close, and would be close again; but to be parted at all was a terrible thought.

Curtis's mind leapt further back in time as he visualised the scene in the heart of Africa where he had first met Mary. It had come about while he was travelling at random through some of the more remote regions in East Africa. Tired and hot, he came one late afternoon upon a homestead in the lee of some low hills, set within a modest-sized fruit plantation. Hospitality was an accepted way of life in those more remote parts, and he had been warmly welcomed; especially so as cultured travellers were not common, and his hosts had a similar background. His stay extended into two months; for here he had found Mary, living and working with her parents, Vincent and Elizabeth Kennet. In the course of talking around a fire one evening, Henry learned that they had unwittingly become involved with a confidence trickster in England about twenty years before, which had led to a substantial financial loss and their near bankruptcy.

As a result they had sold their house in England and emigrated to Africa; there they were more fortunate, and after some time, and listening to local tales in one region, they had come across this unspoiled haven in the wilderness of Eastern Africa: it was rough and overgrown, but here they had found peace and relative prosperity. From their remaining money, and the services of local tribesmen, they had found their new home in some deserted large stone and mortar rondavels, possibly built by slavers in the past; but with work and inter-linking they were gradually transformed into a very habitable and original residence. At the same time they planted several acres of orange trees each year, which flourished in the benign climate. So their estate grew, until by the time Henry had arrived unexpectedly they had planted about 200 acres of both orange and lemon trees in the fertile land. As this was the busiest time of the year, they were only too glad to accept his willing help, which they regarded as a bonus to his good company.

Here it was that Mary had been born, a very child of nature, and to Henry a vision of vivacity and fresh loveliness. Those were days of growing magic in which they lost themselves in each other. The air hummed with their vibrant love, and her parents

were overjoyed as they watched the love between their daughter and Henry Curtis grow and blossom.

The outcome was inevitable, and in due course their wedding was blessed in a simple ceremony at a mission station about fifty miles away. A few weeks after their marriage, they left together to make their own way in the world. Oh, there were many tears from Mary's mother, with promises from the deliriously happy couple to return as soon as they were able.

Her father, too, was equally moved at Mary's going, and found it hard at times to accept the loss of his only daughter, even to a man for whom he had conceived a growing affection and respect. But they knew there could never be any lasting future for Mary alone on their estate; while happy enough now in their isolation, she was too full of vibrant youth to live out her life in an unrelieved emotional and mental vacuum. In the near future the impact and fuller realisation of this cul-de-sac would surely have come about, and none knew this better than her parents; for no matter how free and ideal one's childhood and youth, time does not stand still. Soon she would need to find a life of her own. Divine fortune had been good to them all, and the Kennets were both thankful and lost.

At the same time, Vincent Kennet was also becoming increasingly aware of whispers of change in the air, and of the raw dangers of living in such a remote region. If one was attuned to it, news travelled with an amazing rapidity in Africa, and he had been picking up less than discreet murmurs around his own workforce; murmurs towards which he wore an appropriate facade of disinterest, for to have let on that he heard would only have closed off his primary source of information: whispers of insurrection, mild or otherwise; clashes between some of the Chiefs; the potential hunger for land that they had neither broken nor tilled. Kennet knew very well how, in the raw minds of the indigenous peoples, such 'changes' could very quickly balloon out of hand.

He had called on their District Commissioner, Alexander Hamilton, a good friend of theirs, who was resident in their nearest small town, save when on safari around the huge area which came under his jurisdiction. Vincent told him what he had

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heard, which came as no surprise; in fact Alex was already onto it, and was working his 'patch', as he called it, talking to the Chiefs and their people wherever he went, trying to question the unrest. However, while he was liked and respected, and while the people listened to him quietly and with patience wherever he went, his growing impression had been that this disquiet was not locally inspired, but stemmed from further afield, probably from foreign sources.

Afterwards Vincent then told his wife all he knew and had learned about the potential looming troubles, but neither of them would even think of moving: they had put their all into this corner of Africa, and so, for better or worse, here they would stay. Their nearest very small town was more than a hundred miles away, and of little use to them in any times of trouble; so he shelved the matter, bought two guns, and told himself that in such an isolated part of the world, no one could be sure what good or evil fortunes might arise at any time in the future. At the same time he was careful to give no sign of his fears to Henry, who was thankfully almost wholly immersed in Mary, and the love that had sprung up between them.

Meanwhile Henry took Mary to his home and modest estate between Arusha and Moshi. Fortunately he had inherited enough to ensure him a reasonable living; but the land left to him was better suited to game animals than to creating a profitable farm or ranch. However, he was an active man, so employed a small workforce, experimented with various crops, and shared his expertise with several coffee estate owners around Moshi. He built an animal sanctuary and hospital for any wild creatures that he or his staff found in a poor way and needing help; more often than not these were wounded animals that had been shot and maimed, or caught in traps by illegal poachers. Henry's anger towards the poachers was well known, and there arose difficult and sometimes stormy battles between the frustrated poachers and himself. As his animal sanctuary grew, he became sufficiently well known for overseas veterinary students to offer their services free of charge during their longer vacations. This came as a most welcome help, for the sanctuary was bidding fair to swamp Henry and his few willing, but poorly trained, African helpers.

Here it was that Mary Curtis really came into her own. In the course of time, and as funds permitted, she created a truly lovely garden. With local workers she improved and extended the house to cater for a family; and, African born as she was, she not only brought her own care and expertise to their animal sanctuary, but made it her business to chase the District Commissioner in Arushi, pestering him to employ more game wardens to counter the ravages of illegal poaching. All this time they were both wonderfully happy in each other's company, and in the work they were doing; but such bright and rarefied happiness rarely remains untarnished for long. During a partial lull on their estate, Henry and Mary decided, not for the first time, to go on safari and stay a while with her parents.

How rightly her father had thought, for when they returned for a visit, it was to be struck by a scene of devastation: the rondavels which the Kennets had refurbished and made their home had been desecrated, smashed and burnt to the ground. The orange trees, which had formed the bulk of their estate, were overgrown and surrounded by a season's rotting and dead fruit; nothing of value was left.

Most terrible of all, they had found among the ashes of their home the remains of Mary's parents, picked clean by scavenging vultures and hyenas. For days Mary had been distraught, and it took Henry some time to quell his own shock and calm her awful grief, holding her weeping, shuddering body close, feeling her pain flow into him.

At length it was over. On the third night, while Mary slept the sleep of exhaustion, he had gathered all that remained of her parents' bodies and buried them together, planting at their head a crudely fashioned cross, with their names and dates roughly carved into the wood. He had positioned their grave in front of what remained of their home, overlooking the shallow valley that lay before them. He could do no more, and it was nearly dawn by the time he had crept back to lie by Mary's side.

Henry woke Mary, took her hand and led her to where he had made her parents' grave. He held her close, and through her mind and body he felt a growing acceptance and a semblance of calm; but she felt that their resting place needed a growing floral tribute

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– and what better than an orange bower around and over their grave? They spent the rest of that day building the structure for the bower, finding young orange trees to plant around it, and some orange flowering vines. Mary knew that in time these would wend their way around and over their bower, and at the right season in each year, the trees would fill the air with the pure scent of orange blossoms.

There was nothing more they could do, and while both of them were used to the extremes of beauty and harsh cruelty that coexisted in Africa, the shock of all that Mary had seen had been a savage blow, briefly rocking her very sanity: a child of the wilderness in the home where she had been born and raised, educated mainly by her father, all she had known and loved had been there before Henry had come into her life and taken her heart and love. But the actual sight of her parents' remains, picked and ground, lying in the midst of burnt wood and trampled ashes, gave her the deepest and most lasting shock. They had given her all she had, innocent and happy years with few tears. It would take a long time to soften those memories; the charred and scavenged bones scattered about the rough floor; the abrupt ending to two such selfless lives; the purposeless finality shook her reason. How it would have turned out had it not been for Henry can only be guessed at, but the wonder was that with his strength and their love, she slowly pulled through the crisis and regained her balance and most of her vivacity.

When later they returned to the spot, they were overwhelmed at what they had created and planted. The orange vines had grown and blossomed, and around her parents' grave the air was filled with their scent. Here, like an oasis in the midst of desolation, there had grown a haven of peace and beauty. The burnt-out shell of their house was as they had left it nearly a year before; there were no signs of any human indigenous life; nobody had touched what remained of their cultivated orange and lemon groves; the weeds had grown up and the trees were growing wild. It struck Henry that the brutal massacre that had taken place had worked its way into the African psyche, so that this area had been declared *tagati*.

Henry sighed deeply within himself at these vivid memories, which along with others over the past years, and more, were as bright and alive in his mind as when he had taken part in their enactment. But in that dreaming moment he stumbled, and became aware that he was walking on an increasingly broken surface. The concrete paving had given way to an earthen path that lead down into the slums of Rio de Janeiro. Here and over a large area the very poor and starving existed – murdering, stealing, or at best scratching for a living, until they died of malaria, sicknesses and starvation; too weak and disheartened to find even the most basic needs for their survival; unwanted and unsung, save sometimes by their own.

Curtis had been sunk deeply in his memories, or his normally acute senses would have picked up the mixture of aromas allied with such poverty. He walked deeper into the slums (or favelas as they are known by the Portuguese), half wondering why he did so; but some inner compulsion drove him deeper into the awful poverty. He emptied his pockets of all the money he had on him, and spread it among several poor souls who pulled at his sleeves; then by signs he made it clear that he had no more left, before walking on, all the poorer. Strangely, by telepathy or some inner grapevine, nobody troubled him further. Greetings were called to him from many poor souls, and gap-toothed smiles from some of the older crones, but with no threat of danger to himself; yet the favelas of Rio were reputed to be a dangerous cesspit of robbery and violence, into which the wealthier people of Rio only very rarely ventured. The money he had given out near the edge of the slums could surely not have been the reasons for his safety; for he had walked on for some time, deep into the often appalling smells, from which there could have been no apparent communication.

Besides, he thought, what authority would some poor old crone have among the powerful gang leaders who inhabited these slums from time to time, hiding from the law?

Curtis wondered again why he made no attempt to turn and walk back to the harbour and the security of his cabin on *The*

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Viking, an old cargo ship tramping its way about the world, picking up and transporting cargo where needed on an apparently hand-to-mouth basis. In fact he felt drawn to walk on, even along certain paths, for these slums were a maze of smells, with some sodden and stinking trails leading down and away. The minutes passed, and he felt a rising tide of anticipatory excitement, as he felt close to wherever destiny was leading him. Then, on turning a corner, he stopped; a little above and to his left was an adobe hut on stilts, roofed with old cast-off sheets of corrugated iron. All about him were shanty-town homes, some in better condition, some worse; but below the leading edge of this particular hut sat two children, both looking dirty and uncared for. The younger one, a girl of about eight years of age, had a lost waif-like look about her; but her companion, a boy of around twelve years, was very different. Scruffy and dirty as he was, yet there was an aura of dignity and authority about him, with an intangible attraction, even beauty, that Curtis found tantalisingly elusive at that moment; the boy had an irresistible magic, which Henry came to know better in time.

Henry knew he had to get these two children out of the slums, and also away from Rio de Janeiro. This conviction came not only from the same impulse that had drawn him to this shabby hut which had sheltered them both, but because he felt that both children were in great danger. The slums of Rio could be no more than a temporary shelter in their lives. He opened his hands and arms to them both, and with the boy taking the younger girl by the hand, they came to him. He must take them to *The Viking*, the old cargo ship on which he had a cabin; he was sure Captain Vickery would accept them on board under his care.

Curtis was anxious about how to get to the docks by as direct a route as possible. However, he need not have worried, for the boy appeared to know his way around both the slums and the roadways of Rio. Still, it was some way to the port, and while they were walking Henry asked him who he was, why he was in the slums, who was the little girl, and so on. The boy talked quite freely; but as he talked Henry noticed that he was watchful and keenly observant, missing nothing as he guided Curtis through various roads, but often dodging into side alleys. He gave his

name as Pietro Crevelli, and that his father was attached to the Italian Embassy as an investigator for their Customs Service, maintaining a watching brief on the hugely profitable drug-running cartels, reporting his findings back to his government employers back through their embassy.

He must have been too successful in trailing and uncovering their business, their exporting routes and their leaders. The Mafia, who were an integral part of this illicit trade, tracked down the boy's father, and had come to exact their retribution on himself and his family. This had come about less than a week before Henry had been led to these two children. Three men came to their house one dark evening, and while one man watched below, the other two crept upstairs, expecting to catch them all, Crevelli and his wife, and their young son: they must all be eliminated. As professional killers, the two men in dark clothing, silent and ruthless, caught their victims by surprise and slit the throats of both parents; after which they set fire to the house with the object of destroying any written evidence, and of smoking out the son, who they thought was probably hiding.

They wanted Pietro for what he might know; however, by chance, he was in the garden at the time, watching in horror as the flames from the double-storey wooden house leapt skywards. Stunned and deeply shocked, he was helpless to aid his parents against three strong men, but he had to keep his head. For a while he moved around the garden, hoping that by waiting in the shadows they might be able to escape from the upper storey of the house, but except for the growing crackle and smell of burning wood there was nothing, thereby putting a seal on his terrible fears. Still Pietro watched as the fire took a firm hold of the house, and then the two murderers from upstairs came down, and with their waiting accomplice, spread out into the garden, flashing their torches into and around the dense undergrowth in their murderous hunt for the boy.

Pietro knew he could not evade them for long – a few minutes at most. He slipped behind their bordering hedge, and worked his way into the next garden, and then through the next two; after which, continuing to move very quietly, he made his way into the street. He looked back, his eyes centred on a great torch of

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twisting flames and smoke, casting an eerie flickering glow over the road and beyond, moving in alternate shadow and light, its brightness caught and turned by the waving foliage from a light breeze through many trees. Their wooden house was now a roaring inferno, in which nothing could live; at the same time he saw the three killers weaving their way through a swelling crowd of onlookers to their car a short distance beyond.

They were about to drive off alone, and Pietro knew beyond any shadow of doubt that his parents had been murdered and were dead. He walked on by main roads and short cuts, until he got to the fringe of the poorest area of Rio de Janeiro. He went on deeper into the dirt and slums, for only there could he be reasonably safe for a while; although he knew well enough that the Mafia, with their far-reaching tentacles and eyes everywhere, would hunt him down and stop at nothing to get him wherever he hid.

Henry wondered about Pietro's calm and balanced state of mind during and after the murder of his parents, the firing of their house, and his rationally thought out route of escape: first hiding and waiting in their own garden, hoping; then when the hunt for him was closing in, slipping and dodging through their neighbours' gardens; finally, with little or no hesitation, he had made his way down to the heart of the notorious Rio slums! And yet Henry could not accept that this boy's feelings were as cool as they seemed from his actions: there was a genuine warmth of feeling about him, the way he took care of the little girl was an example of this. But there was more, much more he felt, and during his life any strong intuition he had about people had never yet been wrong. He looked down at Pietro, only to find himself looking straight into a pair of glowing brown eyes, alive with intelligence; but in their depths he sensed more than just a budding intelligence, no matter how acute: he felt the light and movement of a penetrating soul. Henry had the distinct impression that the boy had been following his train of thought; but he felt no resentment, only a strange peace stealing over him, such as he had only rarely felt since the death of his beloved Mary.

Pietro squeezed his hand and said, with a strange maturity that Henry could not place, 'Don't worry; things are not as they may

seem. Wait a little. I am not yet ready. You will know later.'

Henry nodded and smiled down at the boy. There was no sense of his being forward in either his manner or his words, which carried with them an intangible authority. He had just saved both children from either the Mafia, or from a slow corruption and death drowned in the squalid life of the slums; yet he felt comfortable with those few words from Pietro. Somehow he knew that both the boy and his actions were all right, even if they may not quite fit with his age and his story.

'But what about the little girl with you?' he asked, for he could hardly take them both into his care without knowing something about her.

Pietro was initially reserved about the young girl who clung to his hand; but Curtis put tact aside and insisted on knowing as much about her as did Pietro, explaining why he had to know if he was to be able to help them. This was plainly something the boy had no wish to talk about just then. However, he did say that he had found her in the slums, that her speech had been impaired from some awful shock, that her name was Ruth, and she was eight years old. The child was fair, lost and frightened, and could have come from any of several European countries. Except for Pietro, in whom she had placed complete trust, she seemed to be quite alone in the world. She clung to him until they were out of the slums and nearing the docks, when, unexpectedly, Pietro leaned down and whispered something into her ear. Curtis pretended not to notice; but shortly after a small rather sticky hand crept quietly into his; he looked down at her upturned face, and felt a heart-warming glow spread through him, a oneness with the simple trust shown by this uncared-for little waif. Henry felt irresponsibly light-headed in taking on Ruth as well, even with little logical reason other than Pietro's thin responses and oblique assurances.

In this manner they walked on and out of the notorious favelas of Rio, into narrow streets, until they reached the docks, and a fascinating maze of ships, large and quite small; some smart in their fresh coats of paint, others less glamorous in sea-worn coats of mottled rust. Both children were intrigued, and Henry noticed with pleasure how Pietro seemed to shed his burdens and self-

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imposed responsibilities, becoming a carefree boy. He took Ruth's hand in his, and together they ran about here and there. Notwithstanding their torn, shabby clothes and dirty faces, Pietro's personality and gallantry towards Ruth, and his natural charm to all, quickly endeared him to the rough dockers, who waved and called to them both as they made their way along the quay.

Henry felt a possessive surge of warmth as the children ran to him, taking a hand each as they passed great cranes loading or unloading, the dust and the unobtrusive atmosphere that captured the fascination of ports almost anywhere in the world; the intriguing and varied smells as they walked along the quays. All this was a wonderland to both children, and it warmed Henry's heart to have them with him.

There were fewer ships and less activity as they walked along the quay towards where *The Viking* was moored – a cargo ship with limited passenger facilities. Taking Ruth's hand, with Pietro following, Henry climbed the gangplank up to the deck. On board, he took both children with him as he asked for the whereabouts of Captain Vickery, Master of *The Viking*. He found him in his chart room, poring over the cargo manifests and spot-checking yet again the latest weather reports. James Vickery was quite relieved to be disturbed; he was too old and experienced a sailor not to be able to read the weather signs for himself, especially on the next short and simple leg to Montevideo.

He greeted Henry Curtis warmly; he liked this big man, whom he held in high regard. Even before being introduced, and ignoring their dirty and ragged clothes, Vickery stooped slightly and solemnly shook each child by the hand.

'And where did you find these two grubby but lovely souls?'

Both Pietro and Ruth were enchanted by this great man's warmth in his welcome, and smiled broadly, while Ruth even managed to drop a little curtsy! Henry explained the situation to the gruff but kindly Captain. Vickery had little time for trumped-up legalities, and realising the danger and urgency in Pietro's case, agreed immediately to taking him on board, but in Henry Curtis's care. As for the winsome Ruth, ragged and very obviously in need of care and attention, with nowhere to go, dependent on Pietro,

and now on Curtis – Vickery could never have turned her away: such an idea was out of the question. Perhaps at some later stage her parents, or close relatives, might be found; meanwhile she must also stay on board in Curtis's care. So the two children were warmly welcomed.

Although Henry had relied on James Vickery's kind heart, he was relieved it had worked out even better than he could have anticipated. He had a double cabin with a fair amount of space, so there was no problem about where Pietro would bunk down; but Ruth was another matter, afraid as she was of being parted from Pietro, and now from Curtis. However, between them and the Captain they put the problem to Grace Geldart, a spinster in her fifties, a kindly soul, and one of the four passengers. With a little encouragement from Henry and the Captain, Grace was persuaded to move Ruth into her cabin. She then insisted on measuring their sizes, after which she would go ashore and buy suitable clothes for both children.

'What they are wearing,' she declared, 'is not only insufficient, but smelly, grimed and mostly worn out; those clothes should be thrown away.'

Henry was mightily relieved at not being involved in the purchase of children's clothes, and gave Grace ample money to cater for their needs, and taxis for herself.

There was no time to waste, for the ship was due to sail to Montevideo at nine o'clock that night; so, after taking their measurements, Grace left the two children to bath in turn in their respective en-suite cabins, with two big towels to wrap in afterwards, and sped off on her mission of kindness. She returned in good time, and at 2100 hours *The Viking* slipped her moorings, and without assistance from a tug slid away from the quay.

They felt her old twin engines come alive, their vibrations drumming up through the deck planking; the ship's propellers stirred up the dark harbour water astern, thrusting and sucking both fore and aft, churning the turgid sea water into a pea-soup of mixed smells from spilled oil and an assortment of rubbish, slowly turning the ship under its own power towards the harbour entrance. Henry Curtis was enlivened with his two young charges, both freshly bathed and dressed in their new clothes.

The Moving Finger Writes...

Together the three of them leant over the stern rail, watching with hypnotic fascination the glistening water sliding away from under them, and the lamps around the waterfront gleaming dimly in halos of misty light. Before long they slipped past the two revolving entry lights to the harbour, and out into the dark night and the swell of the sea. Now the ship came increasingly alive, pitching and rolling from the surge of the Atlantic Ocean.

Soon after, they turned away in answer to the dinner gong. With all their sights and sounds, Ruth had been particularly entranced by these new sensations. Henry was encouraged, for he thought it likely that whatever her experiences had been, they had shocked her into a mental recession, resulting in her impaired speech as a temporary retreat, from which she would recover in time; he hoped so, for his heart went out to this little waif who, with Pietro, had come to him so trustingly.

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Under the clear starlit sky, *The Viking* built up to its cruising speed, a modest eleven to twelve knots, turning on to a SSE course to meet the Brazil Current that flowed south along the coastline, which should boost the ship's speed to its next port of call at Montevideo.

The Captain, officers, Chief Engineer, bo'sun and crew numbered twenty-seven persons, which included a cook, and a Portuguese steward who doubled as a medic. With Pietro and Ruth, the passenger list had increased to six. Besides Henry Curtis and Grace Geldart, there was Father Paulos, a Spanish priest in his early forties, austere and thin of feature, a quiet man of few words. Jim Maitland completed the slender number of adult passengers; a colourful English character who described himself as a business adventurer, but who at fifty-four years of age still had a roving eye, and a rakish piratical look that enhanced his image.

Very soon after they had sailed, Curtis called on Vickery in his cabin, and came straight to the point. 'Captain, while I don't want to lose Pietro, neither do I want to be accused of kidnapping – nor yourself as Captain to be named as a possible accomplice to the deed!'

Vickery smiled. 'Carry on, Henry. What do you propose?'

'That we send a radio transmission to the Ambassador at the Italian Embassy in Rio de Janeiro, explaining the circumstances and asking for their instructions before we reach Montevideo. I have written this suggested wording.' He passed a slip of paper to Vickery.

The Captain read it out loud: "Pietro Crevelli is in my care on board MV *The Viking*, Captain James Vickery, bound for Montevideo from Rio de Janeiro. I found Pietro in the slums of Rio in a very poor state. He told me that his parents had been murdered by the Mafia, and their house burnt to the ground.

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According to Pietro, the Mafia were hunting for him with intent to murder him as well. Being late in the day, and bearing in mind the immediate danger he was in, I took him on board *The Viking*. Please advise what you wish me to do. Reply soonest. Arriving Montevideo by the evening of the 4th, and leaving two days later for Valparaiso. Signed: Henry Curtis.” Vickery paused.

‘You beat me to it, Henry,’ he continued. ‘I had a similar action in mind, and was about to ask for you. As you say, we mustn’t be caught for kidnapping, must we! Anyway, your wording’s fine. I’ll have this sent off without delay. It’ll have to go via the port authorities in Rio, but I’ll attach a request for an urgent transmission to the embassy. The Ambassador should have it on his desk first thing tomorrow morning. Unless they’re all asleep, you should get their reply by tomorrow. By the way, I notice you make no mention of Ruth in your radio transmission. What’s your thinking regarding her?’

‘She’s delightful, but she’s stunned out of her mind from some shock; so greatly that at present her speech has been so badly affected that we can’t even elicit her nationality. In her case I feel we should wait awhile. After all, right now, who can we radio on her behalf – Lost Property?’ Henry grinned.

‘Well, I agree with you,’ replied Vickery, pushing back his chair as he rose to his feet. ‘I tell you, Henry – though I wouldn’t tell anyone else on board – I’ve had a growing feeling about these two children from the first moment I clapped eyes on them, especially the boy. I think they are meant to be here on board *The Viking*; something mighty unusual about the circumstances in which you found them, but more about Pietro, I feel. There’s some reason behind it, but right now I’m damned if I can see what. I’ll give your transmission to Eric to send it off right away. I wonder if you’ll get a reply,’ he added quizzically.

The short run of three days to Montevideo passed without any unusual incidents. During this time Pietro established for himself a unique position on *The Viking*. His magnetic appeal and quiet assured manner captivated all on board – passengers, officers and crew. He wandered freely about the ship, and from the bridge to the engine room, he was generally welcomed wherever he went. Indeed, had this leg of the voyage been longer, he might have

come near to being regarded as a ship's mascot by the crew.

As for Ruth, in Grace's care and with her strong links to both Curtis and Pietro, she began to regain confidence, and with it some of her lost ability to speak coherently; though still nervous, she came out with both Italian and English phrases – not that this was much indication as to her parentage, which could be either, both, or even neither. However, the circumstances which took her to the slums of Rio de Janeiro remained as deep a mystery. Ruth was not being secretive; she had simply been so deeply shocked by some terrible event that her memory had been blotted out, and any attempts to question her on her family and her past only brought on distress, disorientation and tears; so the matter was shelved, and left to resolve itself in the course of time.

Henry wondered if Pietro knew anything of Ruth's background, but on this matter the boy was unforthcoming, and Henry wondered: he was sure the answer lay within Pietro himself, but at the same time he felt a restraining hand holding him back from probing beyond the sparse facts that Pietro had given him in Rio de Janeiro. However, he felt also that this elusive mystery had its core in Pietro. Either he was less than he appeared, or a great deal more. Henry had no such intuition about Ruth, save perhaps that she had in some way been drawn into Pietro's destiny as an introductory satellite; a wild speculation that found little root in Henry's mind, so his thoughts around this enigma continued to trouble him. He was anxious to find answers to this tangled mystery, and so enjoy their company as children; but the mystery remained. Yet in some compensation for this as yet unsolved puzzle, he found, for the first time in several months, that he was more at peace with himself.

It was Grace Geldart's secret wish to adopt Ruth, although she said nothing of it at the time. This warm-hearted South African widow took the girl to her heart, as did most of those who got to know her. However, Ruth had as yet no memory of where she came from, nor even her names. Pietro had called her Ruth, and she was quite happy with that name. She was a lovely, winsome young girl, coming, as she thought, from the slums of Rio de Janeiro, without any conscious memories beyond to trouble her. Rich or poor, her origins remained a secret, wrapped within her

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until such time as her memory was restored.

The three-day run passed by with few untoward incidents. Wind and seas were very much as they should be at this time of the year, although there were indications of climatic changes on the third day as they followed the coast of Uruguay, with the Brazil Current weakening as it met with the cold waters of the Falklands' northerly flow from Cape Horn.

The Viking docked at Montevideo in the evening of the third day. The next morning the passengers were wakened early by the heavy chatter of the ship's donkey engines, unloading some of their cargo before taking on rough-cut timber for Valparaiso. With shouts and whistles from the dockers, along with commands and warnings given loudly from the ship, with others alongside, the commotion and dust were too much for the passengers, so during the two days in dock most of them explored the city. The Captain had told them earlier that this was one of the more beautiful cities in the world, the people friendly, kind and hospitable. They were delighted to find that Vickery had not exaggerated, and during that time they all explored Montevideo, and found several communicative and helpful people.

Henry and Grace took both children to a beautiful park, in the centre of which was a large boating pond; here they watched for a while as several older men, probably retired, launched controlled radio-guided model yachts, launches and ships. The children were struck in wonder as they saw these finely made models chugging or gliding around the lake, often at some distance from their owners' controlling handsets. With their short radio aerials, steering knobs and levers, the owners seemed able to guide their boats to the furthest reaches of the boating pond. The boy in Henry was equally entranced, so while Grace lay dreamily on the warm grass, he and the children got to know one of the elderly gentlemen who had both a fine yacht and a launch. These he could operate separately on two handsets; or by using a single larger and more complex handset, he was able to direct them both at the same time.

The sprightly old man was only too happy to befriend Henry and the two children, proud to show them his two boats, and how they were guided by remote control. He beamed happily as they

besieged him with questions, although Henry was just as intrigued. The old gentleman, who gave his name as George, often came to the lake to sail his boats. He was a member of the Montevideo Model Boating Club, and he waved about him to point out several others who were also members, and who were also adjusting, preparing or launching their boats – boats of many designs, modelled from different countries and times in history. It was an unwritten rule in the Club that every ship, yacht or boat on their list should be made by hand by the member himself.

‘These two are both quite recent models; in fact I only completed the yacht a few days ago,’ said George proudly.

Henry started the more technical ball rolling by asking, ‘How is the yacht powered, and how do you contrive to control the rudder and sails, and so forth?’

‘Small electric motor, battery powered. Not very authentic, but quieter. I don’t feel it’s right to have a small diesel or petrol motor in a yacht. Of course there’s a radio receiver in all these models you see on the lake, along with a hidden aerial. Quite complicated, you know. I have a small diesel engine in my motor launch. But why talk about it, when your two youngsters are dying to try them out for themselves! Here, Ruth; you try first. Have a go with the launch; it’s easier to handle.’

Ruth’s eyes were as big as saucers as she gingerly held the handset, while George explained how to work it.

‘You see, it’s quite simple to run; there’s a wheel for the steering; this lever powers the engine to send the boat forwards, or if you pull it towards you it reverses the propeller; the further you push or pull the lever, the faster the engine will run.’

George beamed happily as Ruth very cautiously started the launch on its way across the pond. Both of them tried out their skills, and while they soon learned how to handle the launch without too many bumps, they found the yacht had a mind of its own, and was far harder to control. Pietro gave up the unequal battle and handed the controls back to George.

‘I’m afraid of damaging your yacht, sir. I think it must take a lot more practice than we have had.’

‘You’re right, boy; but you’ve done it no harm. The yacht is far more complex to build and to handle. You see, although there’s

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only one electric motor in her, that motor has an involved piece of mechanism which, for want of a better term, is linked to a sort of gearbox. This in turn is linked to the batteries in the boat, and both to this more detailed handset here. To be brief, the motor, gearbox and handset work together to furl and unfurl sails and steer the yacht through its rudder. It was a brute to build; took me nearly a year; but it's a wonder to behold when it sails! Now,' George added, glancing at a pocket watch that he pulled from his waistcoat, 'it's late and I must be getting home. Would you all care to come back with me for a spot of lunch?'

'That's very hospitable of you,' replied Henry, 'but the time has flown by in your company, and it's now well after four. We should be making our way back to the ship.'

'My goodness! You're right. I hadn't noticed the time, but then I very rarely do. Another day then. I live alone, you see. If it's fine, I'll be here again tomorrow.' The old man sniffed the air, reminding Henry of an old hound dog, head up, scenting the breeze.

'Air's damp. Rain on the way. I think perhaps tonight even,' said their genial host in his kindly, broken-up manner of speech as he set to packing up his valuable gear.

It had been a wonderful day for them all, including Grace, who had shown increasing interest. Pietro and Ruth especially were looking forward to tomorrow; but events decreed that their chance encounter with their new friend, George, was to be their first and last.

They parted on congenial terms, leaving their slightly eccentric host talking away to his boats, or perhaps to himself as well; his staccato murmur fading away as Henry and his party strolled towards the docks. But as they walked, Henry's mind turned yet again to the long radio transmission which, without comment, Captain Vickery had given to him the evening before. It lay in his pocket; the words burned into his mind:

To Henry Curtis.

Your transmission received. We deeply regret the deaths of Mr & Mrs Crevelli, and the manner in which they were murdered. Their only son, Pietro, to whom you refer, died here in Rio de Janeiro aged twelve years of a combination of malaria

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and pneumonia exactly one year to the day before his parents were killed. Enquiries were instigated here; these showed that the Pietro Crevelli you have cannot be the same boy. There has not been time to go into this matter more extensively as you required an answer before *The Viking* left Montevideo. Ongoing research will be in Rome, and should be completed by the time you reach Valparaiso, when we will contact you again.

Signed: Matteo Xavier – Ambassador, Italian Embassy, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Eccentric as he was, George knew his weather. It started raining that night; gently at first, but increasing steadily as the hours passed. It rained all that night and for much of the next day, making it virtually impossible to venture off *The Viking*; but at least it laid the dust, leaving the air clean and fresh around the ship.

At length the loading was completed, the hatches firmly battened down and the tarpaulins doubly lashed with special care. Their next and longer run would be neither smooth nor comfortable when they faced the fierce winds and seas around the Horn, the graveyard of many good vessels. All the passengers were back on board, their sailing time noted by the harbour master, and with a little help this time from an ancient tug, they were slowly pulled away from their berth, leaving a temporary gap in the line of cargo vessels from a wide variety of countries, many registered under flags of convenience.

Bill Jakes, the first mate, took *The Viking* a few miles out from the coast, curving her southwards, hoping to catch the last of the southerly current to boost their run; but it was short-lived, for within an hour the opposing flow of the cold Falklands drift had reduced their speed by a couple of knots. The sun was setting over the now distant land, reflecting broken flashes of red-gold lines across the ocean's dimpled waves. Jakes watched this natural wonder, as he had in different seas a hundred times before; it never lost its magic, for he loved the tang of salt in the air and the cleanness of the oceans. Playing just ahead in the ship's bow wave was a school of porpoises; the sea's showpiece of grace and beauty as they leapt clear of the sea, trailing aerial streams of scintillating droplets that glistened briefly in the red-gold of the setting sun.

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Then, tiring of their game, they disappeared beneath the waves with an uncanny suddenness.

Jakes felt sorry when the dolphins had gone. Apart from the old legend that their presence brought good fortune to any ship at sea, he never tired of watching and admiring their aquatic skills. They were like watery shadows when they sliced along the very fringes of high curling waves, with their absolute mastery of the sea's moods and currents, their easy play at leaping, twisting and spinning in the bow-waves of a ship. They were at one and the same time the clowns of the seas, but graceful in all they did, and the very embodiment of life and vitality. But now it was growing darker, and the last of the sun's rays were rapidly working their way up the superstructure of *The Viking*. And with the dolphins gone, Jakes was glad when he heard Eric Blythe, the second mate, climbing the metal steps to the bridge to take over his watch, accompanied by a fresh helmsman, George Bowen, an old and reliable seaman.

For two days all went smoothly... too smoothly: the sea had an easy swell, but the surface glistened in an almost oily calm as they sailed down the flank of the Argentinian coastline. On the third day, the sky ahead was still clear, but the light headwind from the south began to gust, fluffing up wavelets on the surface of the gently heaving sea; but there was a steely feel to the air, which signs deceived neither Captain Vickery, nor his two mates, as they stood together on the bridge.

'Barometer's falling, sir,' said Eric Blythe to the Captain. Blythe was almost wholly of Nordic stock, and with Vickery was acknowledged as having an exceptionally acute sensitivity for the oceans in their varying moods, the changing weather patterns, winds and currents; along with an inbuilt sense of just how much a ship could take in really bad weather, as if it was a living part of himself.

Vickery grunted meditatively as he thought, Circumnavigation of the Horn is always rough with gale-force winds, especially so in these latitudes during the warmer months of the year... A stout well-designed vessel should have little trouble, save for the sickening discomfort; but *The Viking* was old, her engines worn

and tired, and the hull heavily barnacled. At the very least the ship should have been in dry dock and scraped clean before this final port-to-port cargo-carrying trip; after which she was due to be sold or scrapped. But the owners, the Blue Circle Shipping Line, had been uncooperative due to the expense so near the end of *The Viking's* working life.

Well, as Captain, he had the final decision. If wind and waves were abnormally bad he could stand off in the lee of the Falklands until the weather eased. Probably premature thinking on his part, but aside from himself, he could not forget that he was responsible for the lives of thirty-two people, two of them children. He felt a fleeting twinge of regret in ever agreeing to take them aboard; but what choice had he? It was either that or leave them both in the slums at Rio! No, he had been right in his decision; their choice, had they been in a position to choose, was a hell on Earth in the notorious slums of Rio, a short life with disease or violence as its end – or take a chance on board *The Viking*! Besides, there was that something special about Pietro. Ridiculous! he thought. How could anything happen with those two children on board? But his mind was in the singular.

It was late in the evening. Vickery turned to his first mate, who had the watch at the time. 'Carry on, Mr Jakes; we'll keep on course as before, but let me know of any adverse changes. The same goes for you, Mr Blythe, when you come on watch from midnight.' Captain Vickery was generally strictly formal and correct on his bridge; an old-fashioned habit, but a good one.

The first watch passed without any radical change, save that the barometer kept falling, which in itself was not unusual in these latitudes. It was only at 0230 hours, while Blythe was on watch, that Vickery had a call from him on the intercom over his bunk.

'I think you should come on the bridge, Captain.'

Just that. Blythe never wasted words when he thought a matter was critical; Vickery knew this, and that he would not have been called without very good reason. He rose, dressed quickly, and stumbled up a short flight of steps to the deck, and then to the bridge. He had often wished that *The Viking* had a cabin astern of the bridge, but she had not been so designed.

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The sea was still relatively calm on the surface, but the lightly gusting wind that had previously fluffed the sea into wavelets had fallen away, leaving an oily surface with a sizeable swell of perhaps twelve metres from wave crest to trough. The Captain glanced at the barometer, but felt and sensed more.

He turned to Blythe and asked, 'What's our latitude, Eric?' At such an hour Vickery relaxed his formality on the bridge.

'Our last daylight reading was 49 degrees south; right now I'd estimate not less than 51 degrees, sir... approximately parallel to the north of West Falkland,' he added.

'Do I sense a recommendation to hove to?' Vickery said with a wry smile.

'No, sir; not yet at any rate. I'm finding it hard to sense the degree of bad weather ahead. Rare, but cyclonic storms have been known between the Falklands and Tierra del Fuego, and I've an odd feeling that just might be what lies ahead. Certainly a storm, but storms are what we'd expect anyway.'

'I agree, and with your doubts too. On the other hand,' mused Vickery almost to himself, 'we're too far off to be certain. Carry on our present course for the time being, Eric; if within the next hour or so you're sure it's no more than a Cape storm that lies in our path, then don't change course. However, if you're reasonably certain of it being cyclonic, call me at once, and if we're of like mind we'll turn east and head for shelter. Difficult; it's very hard to estimate the intensity of any storm in the dark of night. I'll get the cook to bring you up some hot cocoa. It's too cold!'

Eric acknowledged the Captain's instructions and was about to thank him for the cocoa, but spotted only his retreating back as he was leaving the bridge.

No further call came from Eric during the remainder of his watch, but he left a concise report and instructions for the bo'sun, Hamish Ferguson, who by agreement took over from 0400 hours to give the two officers a break, and to allow them to deal with other matters needing their attention. Ferguson was in his late thirties, experienced and tough, utterly reliable and a mine of ship's information. At the time the watch was changed, the sea swell had increased both in depth and from crest to trough, which *The Viking* was meeting bow on; being heavily laden the ship's

pitch was not as pronounced as it could have been. In accordance with instructions left by Blythe, the bo'sun did nothing for the time being; but by 0530 hours the sky ahead was light enough to show up as an ominous steel-grey, with the usual storm streaks of lightning flickering dimly through its murk. Ferguson also made out what could be a slow anticlockwise swirl. He picked up the intercom to ring for the Captain; but there was no answer, for at that moment Vickery was on the last two steps to the bridge.

The Captain looked quickly ahead, and then turned and snapped at the helmsman, 'Change course immediately to 085 degrees.' Then, pulling the engine room mouthpiece towards him, he spoke urgently. 'Chief, thank God you're there! Listen, reverse port prop, but keep full ahead on starboard. I'll tell you when to resume normal running.'

Vickery turned to the bo'sun. 'Not your fault; it's only just turned light enough to be certain. But, by heaven, we're too close to that cyclonic storm for comfort – barely five miles by the time we've turned on our new course. Let's hope it won't outpace us as it swells.'

Even with the counter-assistance of both propellers, the heavily laden *Viking* was slow to turn. The minutes dragged as the ship completed its 100-degree turn, and the Captain was able to call down to Gordon Mactavish, chief engineer, for full speed ahead. During this time Vickery had been coolly efficient, and nobody, unless they had known him very well, could have guessed at his consuming impatience from his relaxed demeanour; for during the slow-motion manoeuvre he had seen the cyclonic storm steadily expanding as it turned, its tentacles reaching out and driving the elements of sea and wind into a raging maelstrom. It was now a race against time from being caught in the storm's outreaching arms, with the old barnacle-encrusted *Viking* rolling in a flank sea, making scarcely eight knots towards the Falklands.

Vickery berated himself for not changing course during the night, if only as a wary anticipation of what could lie ahead. The *Viking* lacked any up-to-date instrumentation; this had never bothered him before, as it called for greater skills and seamanship; but in the increasingly crowded shipping lanes of the world, their biggest disadvantage was that they could not see ahead at night. If

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only they had radar, the enigma of what lay ahead would have ceased to exist! He berated his old-fashioned folly and stubbornness; all they had were the ship's two searchlights, limited in range, and self-reflecting in fog. But Vickery was too balanced a man to indulge in useless self-recriminations, when his own vast experience of seamanship, with that of Eric Blythe's, had been unable to foresee with any degree of certainty the potential power that lay ahead.

His mind ran over the logic of events: both his and Eric's seamanship had been thrown awry by the darkness of the night. He had been incautious. In spite of their lack of modern instrumentation, this ought never to have become a hazard. He should have slowed at least, or turned the ship east and waited until the dawn showed them what lay ahead, especially in these latitudes where gales and high seas are more common than otherwise; but in spite of these known factors, it was far more probable that the storm that had lain ahead had not been turning, and would not have grown into a cyclone during the night.

Cyclonic storms are rare in these latitudes as they need heat and an intense low-pressure core to spark their destructive revolving power. On the other hand, the Horn, with its notorious gales bellowing into the Atlantic writes its own book of rules, and such extreme westerly gales rushing past the Horn can set up a vicious swirl, which in a complexity of winds and pressures can feed upon themselves. In such rare circumstances, one's seamanship could be deceived, no matter how experienced; for none could have differentiated between a heavy storm remaining as such, or one that could turn cyclonic. But in the dark of night intuition had few roots in facts as they were now, or even as they may not have been when they were felt. But Vickery was the Captain, and in spite of his thoughtful nature he blamed himself, making no attempt to hide behind any conceivably possible notions.

Vickery's thought stream was broken by Jakes appearing on the bridge. He greeted the Captain then looked about him at the now swiftly swelling storm as it gathered momentum and strength. He had already appreciated much of the situation by the movements and feel of the ship from below decks but he glanced at their speed: a shade under eight knots.

‘As you can see, Jakes, we’re heavily loaded and battling while the baby yonder is turning into a giant,’ said Vickery, pointing at the rapidly expanding cyclone as its nearest rim closed in on them.

The wind rose, intermittently buffeting them from the east and whistling through the rigging and stays in a rising and falling threnody of sound – a sure sign of their proximity to the cyclonic storm. ‘We’re too late,’ added the Captain. ‘If we had another three or four knots in hand I’d turn due north with a fair chance of outrunning the storm; as it is we must ride it out. But turn her north by east twenty to thirty points; it’ll give us a better chance of sliding along the edge of the cyclone.’

Vickery had been right. When they turned the gale struck their starboard beam acting as a wedge against the bow and the ship’s flank. Under the circumstances it was all they could do, edging the ship away from the cyclone, giving them a slim chance that its swirling mass would thrust *The Viking* northwards until the cyclone’s strength waned and it fell back before breaking up completely. Long odds, for notwithstanding this being their best point of sailing in the gale-force winds, they were in constant danger of the cyclone’s tentacles reaching out and plucking the ship in towards its vortex.

‘The bridge is yours, Mr Jakes; I must see the passengers and crew,’ said Vickery, and with that abrupt change he hastened away. Bill Jakes and James Vickery had been shipmates and friends for more than seventeen years, and Jakes knew that Vickery’s easy manner was a front, a facade disguising his tension and growing anxiety. Jakes’ mind flickered over the time they had been together and how years ago he had refused a Captaincy in preference to staying on as first mate with Vickery. Jakes made a fine first officer but he had never sought the responsibility of Captain: avoidance? Perhaps; but he had a stronger bond with his friend, and a protective sympathy for the mental burden that Vickery carried; a status quo that he kept rather than pursue promotion.

Jakes’ spirit quailed as he looked up into the dark menacing swirl of the cyclonic storm rising swelling and looming over the ship. Darting within its twisting darkness were flashes of lightning, the threatening mass turning with inexorable power

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against the ship's east by north-east course, expanding and closing on the ship like an open claw waiting to clasp its prey. Jakes shivered; any faint hope he might have held that they could outrun the storm's grip was completely dispelled. The helm was beginning to buck fiercely as the ship pitched and rolled with great slapping waves striking the rudder from time to time threatening to slew her off course. He turned and called to the bo'sun on the quarterdeck below the bridge. 'Get Marcus Law up here to help on the helm no matter what other job he may be on – and fast, bo'sun, there's no time to lose!'

The bo'sun turned and sprinted for the gangway that led below. Jakes grinned for a moment in spite of the closely pending crisis; in all the years he had been on *The Viking* he had never seen Hamish Ferguson run – the authoritative bo'sun who was so highly regarded by all on board!

Within a few minutes, Marcus was standing by Jakes, and moments later had joined John Trent at the helm. Greek by birth, Marcus was physically the most imposing man on the ship; slightly above middle height, he was strikingly handsome and built like a Greek god; perfectly proportioned, he was also immensely strong. Jakes had once seen him lift two of his shipmates high above his head with apparent ease, balancing each on his left and right hands. Marcus was amiable, slow of speech and wit, but he could on occasions move with incredible speed.

At that moment the fringes of the cyclonic storm raged against *The Viking*, and with it the sea began to erupt, preparatory to the huge gale-skimmed mountainous waves that would surely follow. The bo'sun returned to the bridge; he knew that with his experience, expertise and competence, his presence would be of more use to the officer on watch if he was to hand on the controlling centre of the ship. Structural emergencies, among others, could arise, which in his role he would be the most capable of handling.

'Keep her into the wind, bo'sun; we can't afford to be pulled off course.'

We might just make it, Jakes thought. If only we had more engine power! Meanwhile Marcus and John Trent were holding her on their compass bearing by sheer strength. He knew the kick

the helm could give in bad weather, but what it would soon be like he didn't dare think, since they had not been in a storm of such destructive intensity before. He made a mental note to change both helmsmen every half-hour; a job for the bo'sun to draw up a roster. Then there was the engine room; but he made no attempt to speak to the chief, knowing very well that he would be doing all he could to get the last ounce out of the old engines.

Then the power in the cyclone's tentacles struck the ship with an almost unbelievable force, so heavily that she staggered and heeled under its initial impact, the howling winds catching her starboard beam at an acute angle. For a moment there could have been chaos as the seas reached up, hurling a solid sheet of water at the bridge, jarring its very structure, while the quarterdeck below was a boiling swirl of foaming water. Between the extreme force of the gale and the weight of the sea, *The Viking* was heeling almost past her limit; but with her riveted plates screeching under the unnatural strain, almost at the point of no return, she shuddered, before slowly righting herself, the sea pouring out through the scuppers and between the railings.

Swaying easily with the ship's pitch and roll, Jakes reached out and turned on the Kent Screen, a spinning wheel let into a section of the hardened glass ahead of the helmsman, clearing any blurring that would otherwise impair their vision ahead.

Extending Vickery's order to turn the ship some twenty or more points towards the north-east, Jakes made a snap decision to veer her a further five points. He called his order to the helmsmen; *The Viking* steadied slightly as she sailed a trifle more obliquely to the east to west twist of the storm. Apart from the original smashing deluge, they were now deflecting the worst of the storm's crashing force, giving them a greater chance for the ship to make way in the cyclonic swirl. However, Jakes was well aware that if the cyclone continued its rapid expansion to the north, this slight change in course may not long be to their advantage: the ship could be at greater risk from the crushing weight of wind and wave on her stern and starboard beam, which could push her down to the point where the stern could be thrust under; but their immediate need was more urgent.

Although it was less of a risk than running directly parallel to

Identity Problems

the swirling tower of wind, sea and rain, the margin for error was extremely narrow. Stinging gale-blown rain slashed almost horizontally against the bridge; it passed unnoticed in the strain of Jakes' second-by-second concentration, and perhaps even more from his being gripped by a deeply felt sense of responsibility and possible failure. He found himself hoping that either Eric or Vickery would come up to the bridge; but he was officer of the watch, and the near proximity of the bo'sun and the two helmsmen did not in themselves lighten his own responsibility.

In the engine room the chief engineer, Gordon Mactavish, with two of his juniors on duty, had both engines running on full power. He knew he could not maintain such an output for long; they were too old and prone to a variety of problems as their heat increased, placing additional strains on tired and worn parts. He sat in his special corner, glancing from time to time at the slowly rising temperature gauges, and listening with the ear of long experience to the heavy rhythmic beat from the huge thrusting pistons.

Below decks in the passenger quarters, there was disruption and alarm from the punishment *The Viking* was taking. The cacophony was hellish from the howling wind and crashing waves, resonating through the ship's hull, and from the squeal of overstressed steel plates and rivets. Vickery ended his quick tour of the ship with a brief visit to check on his passengers, for he had many matters calling for his attention. With as much confidence as he could muster in his voice, he told them not to be unduly alarmed by the high level of noise, which was more sound and fury than anything else; but concluded by ordering that all of them must stay below decks; under no circumstances was anybody even to think of going on deck...

Three: The Devil's Eye

The old cargo ship rolled, pitched and creaked protestingly in the wild seas, while the raging gale-force winds shrieked and wailed with the force of tortured hell-bound spirits. The worn, tired engines thudded on grimly, almost futilely, against the massive seas that thundered against the ship's sides and the scrubbed, but badly scarred, deck planking, while the helmsmen battled to keep her bows angled to the tumultuous wind and the climbing seas. One moment they were high on the crest of a mountainous wave, the gale howling about them, then in slower motion sliding back against the wave's drag into its trough far below, the hurl of the gale cut off by the vast bulk of the next looming giant. A few moments of blessed peace, while above them flew a sheet of wind-blown spray, slashed by the gale from the massive hill of water ahead. Then up, as in some giant lift being drawn at speed, until they broke through the translucent roof of spray, to be battered yet again by the terrible force of the wind. Two brawny helmsmen strained with a wheel that would suddenly come alive with a vicious will of its own, bucking and kicking as they strove to keep the ship on course.

Whether on the crest being battered by winds above force 12, or in the trough between two mountains of water, it was a continual test of nerves to any on the bridge. Jakes knew only too well how nearly helpless they were in the grip of nature's vast fury, aware of the lurking dread that could overrun his men on the bridge. On the other hand he knew them all as sailors, experienced and tough, and as battered and resilient as the old vessel which had borne many of them for years, sailing over a huge and forgotten number of sea miles in her endless labour of carrying cargo in and out of most of the trading ports in the world.

The Devil's Eye

'My goodness!' exclaimed Blythe, who had arrived on the bridge unnoticed to take over the watch. 'This is exceptional weather.'

His manner and tone of voice were so casual, so much of a gross understatement, that smiles broke out as the tension eased on the bridge, for Blythe was a popular officer, with his youthful and easy-going manner.

Jakes greeted him with relief. 'Your watch, I think, Eric!' He was more tired and shaken than he had realised, so had scarcely noticed the passage of time, nor that he had been actively on watch for over two hours of violent changes and exceptional strain. He was thankful for the sterling qualities of the bo'sun, who had taken much off his shoulders by organising the regular changing of helmsmen, the lashing of two stout ropes acting as handholds from the bottom rails of the bridge steps to steel grips adjoining the metal door that led below decks, down to the human and mechanical hearts of the sturdy old ship.

Jakes managed a grin at Eric Blythe, and told him of his slight change of course to the north, and why; he thanked the bo'sun for his help, and left the bridge. In all his years at sea he could not remember ever having been in a cyclonic storm so far south, nor any of such stunning power; at the same time he wondered how long the old *Viking* could take such heavy punishment, even though she would be in good hands with Eric on watch.

Vickery knew the qualities of his officers and men, so while it was normal practice for a Captain to be on, or nearby, the bridge at such times, he felt that his most useful role during the time Jakes or Eric were on watch was to be below with his passengers and crew. He could feel the strains *The Viking* was undergoing, and could gauge how much resilience there was in her as she rode the immense seas, and how long she could cope in the slashing gale: the margin was narrow, less than he cared to admit, perhaps even to himself. Nevertheless, he completed his inspection from the engine room to the crews' quarters, and finally to the galley, where he was pleased to see that Harry Shaw and Luis Romero, anticipating wild weather, had battened down all they could, so keeping breakages to a minimum.

Vickery's most vital call had been to the engine room, and here

he had spoken in some detail to his chief engineer, Gordon Mactavish, who had stressed vehemently that he could not keep his engines on maximum power for much longer; he showed the Captain the temperatures of the engines, which had been rising steadily in spite of all his duty crew's efforts to keep them cool. Known by experienced marine engineers, there are ways by which much can be done to draw some heat off overworked engines; but there is a limit, and this margin was drawing closer. Vickery did not have to think before asking the obvious.

'I need to know how long you can give me at maximum power, chief. If we reduce now I doubt we'd be able to hold steerage way in this gale, which would mean being driven under. Can you give me up to thirty minutes?'

'Aye, but not one minute more. I can't even guarantee as long as that before a head gasket blows – or worse, an engine may seize.'

'You're always such an optimist, Donald! But thanks.' Vickery's last two words were spoken as he turned to the bridge voice tube, pressed the red knob which rang on the bridge, took off the cap and waited a moment. Blythe heard the ring, leant forward and removed the cap at his end. 'Captain here, Eric. Can we break free of the storm's rim within half an hour?'

'No, sir, not a chance in my opinion. It's all we can do to hold her on course.'

'As I thought, even from down below,' replied Vickery. 'The engines are at their limit, and can't hold out much longer on full power. We have thirty minutes at the absolute limit before we must reduce to two-thirds. Turn into the storm at an angle of fifty degrees, more or less; I leave it to your judgment. We must chance cutting into the cyclone and finding its heart. I think once we've broken through the outer rim itself there's a fair chance of slightly easier seas. I'll be on the bridge soon; I must look in on the passengers again.'

Vickery turned to the chief. 'You heard what I said, Donald! Only thing we can do under the circumstances – caught on the rim, or go for the eye! We'll make it, and then review our situation. I must be off.' So saying, he turned to climb the steel ladder out of the engine room.

Below decks there was comparative calm, at least from the howl of the gale; but the stresses and strains on the ship's hull and internal structure, the agonised creaking and groaning, filled the air with its continual melancholic refrain, bitter in its extremes of tortured steel and strained rivets. Riding light, *The Viking* was never too stable in turbulent seas. But she was fully laden, which made her unnaturally sluggish: under present storm conditions this had the counter-effect of placing a heavier load on the engines; while on the positive side, in spite of the rolling and pitching, the ship was more stable in such seas.

Vickery's last call was to the small lounge, where he anticipated his passengers would be gathered. He rolled in with a rush of cold air through the opened door, pausing a moment while his eyes flicked briefly but penetratingly around the room. The tableau before him was an interesting character study in itself: Henry Curtis was relaxed in an easy chair, with Pietro standing next to him, an arm resting on his shoulder; Ruth meanwhile was curled on his lap, held in Henry's protective arms, trying to calm her natural fear. Grace was lying on the only settee in the furthest corner of the room, clutching a box of paper handkerchiefs, an aroma of sickness in the air about her. Father Paulos was sitting very upright on a light chair, looking pale but determined, his closed breviary in his hands. Near to the door, Jim Maitland lounged in an armchair. In his early fifties, lean and well built, hard of feature, his clothes impeccable, he was an adventurer and a man of unknown business; but in spite of this fad there was about him an impression of mental and physical toughness. He looked back at the Captain through cool, light blue eyes, his long well-tailored legs thrust out indolently before him; the first impression was one of casual indifference, but his easy pose belied an alert tenseness and fear, for Maitland was intensely claustrophobic, with a deep horror of being cornered or trapped in any way.

Curtis was the first to speak, 'I, and I'm sure this includes my fellow passengers, would be glad if you would give us a frank appraisal of this storm, and your opinion as to our chances.'

'Yes, yes indeed! We want to know what is going on,' piped up Father Paulos, his voice driven higher by his natural anxiety, and

followed by nods and a murmur of agreement from Maitland. Grace was too far gone at this time to make any sensible response; all she desired above anything was for the ship to stop its pitching and tossing about.

Vickery paused a moment while he chose his words with care. The brief silence enhanced the sounds of the ship's heavy pitching and rolling, from which she often shuddered, recovering slowly, set to the unearthly tune of creaks and groans that stretched and howled their dirge from fore to aft, port to starboard, sometimes rising to an intense crescendo wherever the strain was at its greatest. There was something hellish and unreal about the maddened violence of the storm, the tortured ship battling to stay afloat, the very real feeling of being trapped below decks with no means of escape. Heightened by the situation, and with sound enough reason, these factors struck apprehension and even fear into them all. Then the Captain spoke, and the spell was partially broken.

'All right, Mr Curtis,' said Vickery, smiling rather grimly. 'But you must first understand that it was not my wish that we should carry any passengers on this trip, one that will take us round the Horn. It is arguably one of the most hazardous seas in the world for any ship; I have of course taken this run many times, but it's always a gamble in that on no two occasions has the weather been alike, which can be of more concern in an old and well-worn vessel. In fact it is only the second time in all my years as Captain of this ship that my wishes regarding carrying passengers have been overridden. However, there's no use in crying over spilt milk... or the demands of the owners,' he put in wryly, 'and all of you knew the risks before taking a berth on *The Viking*.'

'She's an old ship, well past her best. Her engines, even when new, lacked sufficient power to cope safely with a sea and gale such as this; now they are less reliable and less powerful, not to mention other problems that have crept in with age. On the other hand, *The Viking's* hull is stronger than most modern vessels, which means that she can take a heavier pounding.'

'I may not be your beau idéal of a passenger ship's Captain,' he went on rather gruffly. 'I haven't the smooth diplomacy for such a position – which I suppose is one good reason why I'm still with

this same old girl after twenty-five years!' He slapped the bulkhead as he spoke.

'Anyway, I've no time for lies or half-truths, and certainly not at a time like this.' Vickery went on to elaborate on as much of their situation which he considered suitable.

'We're too borderline,' he concluded, 'with too many uncertain factors ahead for me to be able to say with absolute certainty how the old *Viking* will hold up in the hours or days ahead. What I can say is that I have fine officers and a good crew who are well used to handling her under difficult conditions; the difference is that these are extreme conditions, rare even in this part of the world...'

'But can't you tell us any more than that, man?' snapped Maitland, leaning forward angrily in his chair. 'You've been Captain of this floating junkyard for aeons. You must have some clearer opinions, accurate or not; otherwise what in hell are you wearing that uniform for? Furthermore,' he added coldly, 'I've always understood that ships' Captains have the final say regarding any decisions on their vessels.'

Curtis leant forward to intercede, but before he could do so, the Captain, a cold blue glitter in his eyes, spoke. 'Your rudeness, Mr Maitland, does you no credit. Your temporary lack of control could just be excused under the circumstances, so I'll let it pass; however, may I remind you that everyone was cautioned by me before they took passage on *The Viking* round Cape Horn, yourself included; but that aside, let me tell you that nobody on this ship, crew or passengers, is permitted the indulgence of speaking to me as you just have. I trust you will remember that. On your other point, I'm not prepared to go into the ins and outs of a Captain's authority on board his ship, which can be more involved than you think.'

Vickery was an old man and a true master of the sea and its wayward moods. Even so, many years as Captain of the same ship, too easily within his seniority and experience, had tended at times to make him a trifle old-fashioned in his speech and manner, which harmlessly cloaked a shyness in his nature that he strove to hide, but was well known by those close to him; to the crew, enhanced by his old-world courtesy, his gruff kindness and

concern for their welfare endeared him to them. But Maitland was not a tolerant man, and inflamed by Vickery's apparent beating around the bush, along with the stressful situation they were all in, he found the implication against his cherished courage more than he could take.

He slowly got to his feet, white to the lips, eyes blazing. 'I *fear*!' he almost spat out in disgust. 'I fear nothing, neither God nor Devil, man nor beast...'

But Curtis was also on his feet, reaching out a large hand to grip Maitland's arm as he spoke. 'Oh, sit down, Maitland, there's a good fellow.' At the same time he gently but firmly pushed him back to his seat. 'I'm sure Captain Vickery meant no offence, and you were far too hasty and ill-judged in your speech.'

For a moment the two men looked steadily at each other: Curtis's face was calm but firm, Maitland's a picture of white fury. Then the tension broke, and Maitland laughed, 'Yes, you're right; pray accept my apologies, Captain,' he said smoothly, and with a slightly mocking bow; but his eyes were cold, and there was no laughter in them as he sank back into his chair.

'Well, Captain, perhaps you would give us the benefit of your further opinion,' put in Curtis, pouring oil on troubled waters. 'With your long seafaring experience, several years of it as *The Viking's* Master, I'm sure you have a good idea as to how we have been caught in such extreme weather, and some idea as to whether the ship will be able to emerge from this holocaust.'

'Indeed I have, Mr Curtis,' replied Vickery quietly, 'but I must be brief, as I'm needed on the bridge.' Then he spelled out the situation in terse, clipped sentences: the rare cyclonic storm in which they had been caught; the overheating and underpowered ship's engines, with the chief engineer's time limit, and other relevant factors; finally his decision in consequence to cut into the storm to find its calmer centre.

'As to how long we can hold out, that's harder to answer; there are too many unknown factors involved. We're very dependent on the state of our engines, which knowing our chief engineer's tendency to understate their qualities, and overstate their weaknesses, I'd be surprised if we have more trouble than he and his men can handle. As to how long this spiralling cyclonic storm

will last, I cannot say with any measure of certainty since, as I said earlier, storms of this nature are rare in this part of the world. As a general rule, cyclones blow themselves out in a few days, a week at the most; in these colder waters it should subside more quickly, but Cape Horn in the blast of the westerlies has its own uncertain rules. In short, I hope, but I cannot commit myself. On one thing I can be definite: *The Viking* is old, but our two lifeboats are less than two years old, motorised, fully provisioned and, so I've been told, virtually unsinkable. I'm not anticipating having to use them, but I thought you should know. For the time being I hope this answer will satisfy you all; I agree with Mr Maitland's underlying thoughts, in that it's better and easier to know the true situation.

'By the way, you must all stay below decks; the gale and seas up top could whip you off your feet and carry you overboard; in which case you'd be lost to the sea, for there would be no chance of rescue, nor could there be any attempt. However, on a note of encouragement, I must tell you that I've given you a rather stark side to the picture; there is much that could happen to improve the situation, and one can never tell at sea. For instance, if we do have to resort to the boats, then we'll probably be fairly close to the shore; it may be barren and rocky, but at least you could hardly avoid being blown onto it with a following wind, and with an excellent chance of landing in one piece, especially as both lifeboats will have an officer and some first-class seamen.'

Vickery turned to go; but before he reached the door, Maitland got to his feet. 'Captain!' he called out. Vickery paused. 'I am truly sorry for my harsh words. You have explained matters very clearly to us all. Please accept my sincere apologies.'

Vickery swung back for a moment; a whimsical smile touched his weather-beaten face. 'That's all right,' he said. 'The matter is best forgotten. But understand, I can be quite as blunt as you, though perhaps more to the point.' After which he left them and headed for the bridge, but not before beckoning to Curtis.

Outside the gale was blowing as strongly as ever, and there was a cold nip to the wind which caused the more lightly clad Curtis to shiver and pull his coat closer.

'Humph! Wind's almost due east on our port beam,' growled the Captain, sniffing the air.

‘And what does that mean?’

‘It means that Eric has successfully turned into the storm, which gives us a better than even chance of breaking into the calmer centre. But that isn’t what I wanted to say. I want to thank you for your support in there just now.’ He jabbed his thumb towards the closed door. ‘Also, while I have the chance, I’d like to say that it’s been a real pleasure having you on board this voyage, even more so with the two children you picked up in Rio; the boy especially has endeared himself to the officers and crew, and – er – myself included. He’s a fine lad, but I’m thinking there’s more to him than a first impression could indicate. Now I must get back to the bridge. We’ll do our best for you.’

Curtis watched Vickery rolling off in easy and perfect balance up the heaving gangway. ‘Well, I’ll be blest,’ he muttered, smiling to himself. ‘Poor old fellow.’ Then made his own more stumbling way back to their lounge.

Blythe was still on watch when the Captain arrived on the bridge. He glanced at the compass bearing, then his watch, took in their new course, and observed the gale-force wind was now striking *The Viking* diagonally on their port side, thrusting the ship perilously close to its maximum inclination on the heavier rolls.

‘Eric, we haven’t the time to do a curve-in to the eye; turn a further 45 degrees south right away, and let’s see how that feels. Bit of a risk, I know, but the engines won’t hold at this rate of turn, and we’ve barely ten minutes in hand at this power output. When we’ve turned, ring down to the chief to cut to three-quarter speed; that should keep him happier.’ Vickery knew that Gordon would have held some safety reserve in hand.

Under Blythe’s directions, *The Viking* turned almost due south, adjusting the course a point or two; after which he rang down to a mightily relieved chief to reduce speed accordingly. ‘In spite of the gale on our port side, she’s running a mite smoother, sir,’ commented Eric, ‘but we’re only making just six knots. How long do you reckon before we break into the eye?’

‘You know as well as I do, Eric, that it depends on the depth of the cyclone, and at this point to make such an estimation with any degree of accuracy is impossible. However, if we bear in mind that the storm has been expanding, and that it can only do so

towards the open sea, with the turned-up toe of South America and the Forties acting as dual buffers, it should only be expanding north and east; in which case I'd hazard a guess that the eye and *The Viking* are converging; perhaps even within forty to fifty minutes. In any case, I feel the storm may be close to its full expansion, and will hopefully begin to blow itself out.'

The two men were standing side by side, thoughtful and alert, unconsciously and easily adjusting their balance to the ship's heavy pitch and roll, even to the unnatural angle of the deck under the blast of the gale. 'You're a natural sailor, Eric,' Vickery went on after a short silence. 'Why ask what you've probably already assessed?'

Eric Blythe laughed. 'You're right, sir! My own ideas were very similar to yours; I just wanted to check how well my intuition and logic compared with your own assessment.'

The minutes passed; thirty minutes; an hour. At some point two fresh sailors came on duty to relieve the two tired helmsmen. A short while after this changeover, Vickery pointed ahead to a violently disturbed sheet of aerated water reaching high above their heads, much higher than *The Viking*, and moving steadily towards them from the south by south-west. 'There it is, my boy,' he said with some relief, 'about where I'd guessed it to be. Once through that thin wall and we're in the eye of the storm. I think it's weakening ever so slightly; under full blast I'd have expected that wall of swirling water to be taller.'

A few minutes later and they had sliced through the wind-blown sheet of water into a comparatively calm sea. Behind, and receding deceptively fast, was the retreating roar of the storm churning its way north by north-east. Lying ahead was a similar advancing wall, slightly less than a mile away, but swirling from north to south.

'Ring down for half speed, and turn her around without delay, Mr Blythe; then keep her bows on, and in pace with the receding wall we've just pierced. We need a breather from that pounding before we break through the approaching wall.'

For a moment Eric looked a trifle stunned, which had not escaped Vickery's eagle eye. It was an incredibly impressive sight, with *The Viking* lying near the edge of the northerly side of a

tubular spiral of wind-driven open air, rising up several hundred feet. As Eric looked up through the storm-spun funnel he saw a roundel of blue sky, flaked at its rim with slender curving streamers of water vapour, striving – but failing – to escape the spinning forces of nature that held the storm at bay; creating at its heart a circular sea of apparent calm, kept so only by the centrifugal force, beyond which slender boundaries raged the fury and might of the cyclonic storm. In spite of his years at sea, and his considerable experience of storms, Eric felt as though he had been transported to another world; unique, magnificent in its easy rolling power, staggering but frightening, yet beautiful.

‘Mr Blythe,’ Vickery cracked sharply, ‘this is not a sight-seeing tour! We can’t just stay where we are; I want enough time to check the state of the ship, especially the engines; after which we must break through the opposite wall. Remember, the storm is almost certainly moving away from the mainland, expanding and weakening. Our next course must lie west of south; it’s our only chance of breaking free, hopefully towards calmer seas. We tried to slip past the storm when we headed to the Falklands, and you saw the failed result of that attempt.’

Vickery paused, and looked at Eric; then spoke swiftly, but more gently. ‘Not many have been in the eye of a cyclone and lived to tell the tale. There’s nothing quite like it. Turn the ship now, after which you’ll have moments to take in what you’re not likely to see again. To hold position, you may have to use the engines as well as the steering. We’re out of the gale and the huge seas for the moment, but the currents can be vicious in the eye of any cyclonic storm, running anticlockwise where we are, but stirring up counter-currents and vortexes, especially towards the middle. Keep as near to the north-east wall as you can. When we move to break through the south-west wall, whoever’s on watch will need to look out for a reversal in the main current. It’s not known as “The Devil’s Eye” for nothing! Takes a good seaman to handle it, and that you are.’

As Vickery spoke, Eric had time to readjust his mind, pulling his thoughts back to this world, and the reality on it. ‘Yes, sir; and thank you. I’ve never been in such a situation before,’ he replied. Then he moved to carry out his Captain’s orders.

Vickery nodded, gave Eric a quick smile, and turned to leave the bridge; but he was worried, and felt a little guilty at snapping at his second mate and being so explicit in his nautical advice. By any standards Eric was a first-class seaman, but Vickery knew just how critical was their situation, and how easily beguiled anyone could be by the seeming calm in the eye of a cyclone.

Vickery met Jakes on his way to relieve Blythe on watch, and both men paused to compare notes and update on any changes. 'Neat work, sir, hitting the centre of the storm's eye.'

'A good deal of luck involved. You don't need to "sir" me, Bill, when there's no one about, especially in this crisis – which is by no means over. Eric will fill you in on the situation and my orders when you relieve him on the bridge; however, I'd prefer it if you delayed taking over for about half an hour: Eric's just getting his hand in on an almost unique situation; I'd like him to have the experience while he can. Have you done anything about our bo'sun? He's playing a vital role, but he can't carry that burden for twenty-four hours a day.'

'I told him to stand down and take a break, and I put in John Patterson as his direct assistant; he's standing in for the bo'sun right now.'

'I agree. The best choice; I've had my eye on him for some time with a view to making him a permanent second bo'sun. We'll review it again when all this is over,' Vickery replied, and both men passed by; Jakes to the bridge on a watching brief for thirty minutes, and the Captain towards the engine room, the most vital part of the ship.

Vickery had it in mind that it might be wise to head for the Falklands when the storm had blown itself out, and there in dock to do whatever was needed to put the engines in as sound running order as possible; much lay on the outcome of his talk with the chief, which was his main reason for holding on in the storm centre for a while: the engines worried him more than he had shown to Gordon Mactavish.

Vickery glanced up at the circle of comparatively clear sky through the open funnel of the cyclonic storm, darkening now as evening drew into the early shades of night. He sighed, for he was feeling his years, as a deep weariness was beginning to set in; it

had been a long day, along with some of the night before, and he was reaching an age where he had to weigh his activities against his dwindling stamina. But he was the Captain, so regardless of his years he could never show any weakness. Perhaps the Blue Circle Shipping Line would retire him after this voyage...

On his way down to the engine room, Vickery called in to the passengers' lounge. This time he was not blown in by a powerful blast of wind, and the ship was as stable as it should be in moderately calm weather. Only Maitland and Grace Geldart were there; Paulos, Curtis and the children were obviously in their cabins nearby.

'It's wonderful! But why's it so calm?' exclaimed Grace, 'and so suddenly. Are we through the storm, Captain?'

'Afraid not, Miss Geldart; we're in what is known as the "eye of the storm" – right in the middle. The cyclone is revolving around us. We'll take a break here: I have to check the ship, which will take about thirty minutes; after which we must break through the southern wall into more rough weather, until we clear the storm. But you can all go on deck and see a unique and incredible sight, one that very few people have seen. However, it is most important that you all get below again when you hear the ship's hooter give three loud blasts.'

'Tell me, Captain,' asked Maitland, 'as the "eye of the storm" is so placid, can we not remain here until the cyclone breaks up?'

'Good question,' replied Vickery, glad to see that there were no lingering traces of animosity towards him. 'The fact is that the eye, or core, of any such storm can be both the safest and the most hazardous place to be; depends when you're in it,' he added wryly. 'Right now, with the cyclone still raging and expanding, it's safe enough; but once it starts to break down and contract, then so does the "eye of the storm". As of now, the fairly placid sea lake we're on is in a temporary state, an illusion almost; its apparently sheltering walls of gale and whipped-up water are kept at bay by the centrifugal force of the spinning storm.'

'There's no absolute rule of thumb to this, but when a cyclone collapses, which can happen slowly or quite quickly, then the eye, or core, can often become the focal point of the storm's implosion. At that stage it ceases to be calm, as it is now, but

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becomes the centre of a powerful maelstrom, in which winds can howl from any direction, even from above; powerful currents rip this way and that, but generally towards a central, sucking vortex. The vortex wouldn't sink a ship of this size, but it could keep it turning, like a sheep on a spit, destabilising the steering and making the vessel very vulnerable when at awkward angles to gale-force winds, and virtually impossible to handle. No, Mr Maitland; the "eye of a cyclone" is something to be seen, almost unique, but not a place to hang about in longer than is absolutely necessary. I hope that answers your question, albeit fairly briefly.'

'Indeed it does, Captain; and very clearly.' Maitland paused a moment, then asked, 'Tell me, if you don't mind; did you find the "eye of the storm" by seamanship, or was it just by chance that you came upon it?'

Vickery was already edging towards the door, but stopped. 'I'm sorry, but I've no more time to spare. I must get to the engine room. I'll answer you more fully another time; right now I'll just say, yes, we found it by seamanship, and it's easier to do so than you might think.' At which point Vickery opened the door and left, closely followed by Grace Geldart and Maitland, to tell the other passengers and to see how it was for themselves.

Nobody knew better than James Vickery the moods and vagaries of the sea, how even the most experienced of sailors can be wrong-footed by a logical misjudgement, or a stream of uncertain factors. He knew that while he had used sound reasoning to Eric on the bridge, that reasoning could be blown asunder by the quirky vicissitudes of wind and wave, currents and weather. He had given Eric textbook logic, and he knew he was right in doing so, for it was after all the logical pattern of the storm and its consequent events. Such thoughts, and many others, poured through Vickery's mind as he clattered his way down to the tropical heat in the engine room.

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Due to the storm, the chief engineer, Commander Mactavish, had been forced to double his men on duty, pairing the six men under him to two hours on and four off, which was tough in the torrid, enervating air in the engine room. The chief himself had an almost uncanny knack of always being on hand when needed, only snatching short spells when possible in either the galley or his cabin.

Meanwhile, on the bridge Eric Blythe was having a hard time keeping *The Viking* in position. This in turn put additional strain on those in the engine room, who had to cope with frequent changes in revolutions on both propellers, occasionally varying between the two on forward, then reverse thrust on either propeller.

Vickery arrived in the engine room to find Gordon Mactavish, that hardy old engineer, no more than five or six years younger than himself, seated in his own chair; so chosen that from this vantage point he had the widest view possible of the old ship's engines under his control. Long ago he had also cunningly welded in place two strips of heavy metal sheeting, which deflected and minimised much of the mechanical thunder around him.

Vickery ran through the situation with the chief, sparing nothing, telling him what they might well have to contend with that night, and very likely through to the next morning.

'How are the engines holding up, Gordon?'

The chief rose from his chair. 'They're cooling. This juggling about with the revs from the bridge is giving my chaps a busy time of it, but as the power output is low the engines are cooling that much faster. How much longer are you going to keep us in the eye of this storm?'

'That's precisely the reason I'm here, Donald; I need an unofficial up-to-date report from you – first as to the general reliability of the engines, but also how long you consider I can

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reasonably rely on them for maximum revolutions. The storm may weaken as it spreads wider, but I can't see it breaking up before dawn, so I must take the ship through the south-western wall of the eye. I'm almost certain the cyclone is moving in a north-easterly direction; that being so, I anticipate the gale first breaking up nearer the land rather than out in the Atlantic. Of course, with difficulty and constant alertness we could stay where we are – in the eye; but that's a risky course of non-action to take. Storms of this nature can dissipate outwards, but are also likely to collapse in on their centres, and if in the centre then we'll get more trouble with raging, diverging currents and clashing wave patterns than I think the old *Viking* could cope with. Case of Hobson's choice, really. Anyway, I'd like to be out of here within the hour.'

'Well,' growled the chief, 'if you don't bully these engines by demanding maximum power for longer than ten to fifteen minutes, I think I can guarantee they won't let you down through the western wall, and into more of the rough weather.'

'Good!' replied Vickery. 'That's what I was hoping to hear. But here's another, Gordon. You know these engines better than anyone, so your opinion is critical. In your experience, and from the limitations of the engine you asked me to impose, do you consider them sufficiently reliable to take us round the Horn to Valparaiso, and on from there? Or would you recommend an urgent overhaul?'

His beloved engines! On the other hand, hard man as the chief was, professional honesty compelled him to answer, 'Aye – there's no doubt about them needing a good overhaul. But then so does much else on the ship,' he added protectively. He paused and sighed deeply. 'I'm not the Captain with your responsibilities, James, but in deference to them, I cannot advise taking this ship round the Horn; the engines are now too unreliable; they were in borderline condition even before we left Liverpool. This storm has put a severe strain on them, which has in turn accentuated the flaws and increased the wear and tear. As you know, the Blue Circle Shipping Line picked one of their tame engineers to check these engines, and his report stated that they were old but sound enough for another round trip. My own report was quietly binned.'

‘Thank you, Donald; I know it cost you to give me that view,’ replied Vickery as quietly as the engine room would allow. ‘After I’ve turned the ship, I’m going to need maximum power for ten minutes or a bit more; thereafter, I’ll try to keep three-quarter speed as our maximum. I’ll be making our move in about twenty minutes. Thanks for your advice. I must check on the passengers again; I only saw two of them just now.’

‘That’s all right, no problem there; I can give you a safe ten minutes – even a little more if needed, as they’ll have had a good chance to cool,’ Mactavish replied, with the hint of a dour smile drifting across his tired features.

Vickery found his passengers on the quarterdeck. None of them had been in the eye of a cyclone before, so they were struck with wonder, and full of questions, which Maitland was trying to answer from what he had just learnt from Vickery in the passenger lounge. Both Henry Curtis and Grace Geldart looked tired from the wear and tear of the storm, appearing pale in the fading light of day; but Maitland and Paulos were in better shape, being less affected by the continuous pitching and rolling with, until this short spell, the almost unbroken groaning and screeching from strained rivets and plates.

The Captain stood quietly, and looked over to where Pietro had his arm about Ruth as they leaned over the rail watching some fish just below the surface. It was clear that Ruth drew comfort and reassurance from Pietro’s presence and touch, for she was still nervous and tense from the unusually rough weather, whereas Pietro seemed fresh and unchanged by all they had been through.

It was not the first time that Vickery had sensed something unusual about the boy. In spite of his own tiredness, he looked more closely at Pietro; but as he did so a warm light shone momentarily before his inner eye. Startled, he looked again, but this time saw only a bright and intelligent face, lightly freckled and broad of brow: a good-looking boy, yet his attraction did not lie in his looks, but rather from an indefinable source within him; a sense of peace certainly, but also an elusive quality that drew people to him, like iron filings to a magnet. Wherever Pietro had been on the ship, reactions and speech among his crew had

invariably eased. And who was Ruth? Had she any special qualities? He felt not; an attractive girl, but little more. In a very brief space of time, these thoughts and impressions sped through Vickery's mind. Then he brusquely thrust them aside. He would reflect on them later; right now he had a ship to run and pressing matters to attend to.

When Vickery had talked to the passengers much earlier, some had been full of questions. Now, in the temporary lull after being battered by the wild weather, so great was the unique impact from the eye of the storm, that their spirits were rejuvenated, and there was a general atmosphere of awe and unquestioning acceptance. Grace Geldart was making some recovery from her seasickness; Jim Maitland was in a placid frame of mind; Fr Paulos was more relaxed, with some colour in his cheeks; while Henry Curtis, looking worn and older, was yet intensely struck by all he saw about him.

The quarterdeck was not large, but it made for a unique stage on which Vickery called his passengers together to explain briefly the unnatural calm, while beyond them raged the raw violence of combat between the spiralling gale-force winds, and the intruding pressure from the turbulent storm, held back behind a thin sheet of swirling water. Even in the fading light, the sharp distinction between the calm within, and the angry forces of nature without, was not lost on any of them. The sheer immensity of the raging wind and the cruelly whipped-up sea was both daunting and magnificent. At the same time they were all deeply aware of an eerie power, latent in the peace in which *The Viking* held station; against which railed a wild antagonistic force, kept at bay by the centrifugally driven curtain of water that swept around them in a huge circle, accompanied by Wagnerian music from a great wind that kept the storm at bay, and the two forces in even balance.

Vickery ended his short discourse by saying, 'I'm glad to see that you've all got your life jackets on while on deck. I advise you to keep them with you until we're clear of this storm. In about fifteen minutes I'll be turning the ship and heading for the southwest wall of our temporary haven, which means back into the storm; but this time with the gale striking our starboard side – that's to your right facing forward,' he added, 'just in case any of

you have forgotten the difference. But I must insist that you all go below again when you hear the ship's horn give three blasts. Don't cut it too fine; with the lurch of the ship these cyclonic winds can hurl anyone over the side; don't underestimate the forces at work; the sea's an unsparing mistress!

'As this storm is moving towards the north-east, our next leg beyond the south-west wall should be shorter; I hope to be out of this cyclone around dawn. Remember, no two ships are the same; their reactions in varying seas are never alike. My officers, and most of the crew, have been with me on *The Viking* for several years. They are experienced seamen who know the strengths and foibles of this ship in all types of weather. I rely on them, and so can you.'

After his brief words of encouragement, Vickery turned and left the passengers. His final call was to look in on the galley, to check on the regular availability of food and hot tea or cocoa around the ship. Men working on shifts around the clock burn up a lot of energy, and would soon flag if not properly fed. Having satisfied himself on this score, and given a few words of praise to Harry Shaw, he returned to the bridge.

Here Vickery found Eric holding *The Viking* in position, bows on about 45 degrees against the swirling current, inclining northerly at this point in the revolving eye, with finely balanced touches to the helm, but with fewer changes to engine revolutions as he became more used to this unusual form of seamanship.

'Well done, Eric,' said the Captain, 'tricky business holding her in position in varying currents and with the eye moving north-east.'

'That it is – tricky, I mean. By the way, sir, it was Bill's watch, but he agreed to my continuing for a further hour; I didn't want to miss any of this,' Eric said.

'That's fine,' said the Captain. 'Now I want to turn the ship 180 degrees. Not too much space to spare, so kindly reverse starboard and forward port engines, both at half-speed, and hard over on the helm. We'll make use of the current to help us round.'

Eric acted immediately and smoothly, and *The Viking* turned neatly on both power and rudder. Looking down, Vickery saw the

passengers on deck. He pulled the cord to the ship's horn three times, and the blast echoed clearly over the ship, resonating hauntingly within the circumference of the eye; but to make sure, he picked up the ship's tannoy and spoke. 'Ahoy, passengers! This is it; we're turning the ship; in a few minutes we'll be breaking through the sheet of wind-blown water ahead. Get below now; there's no time to lose. Get below!'

Having done what he could for them, Vickery then turned to Eric. 'Head straight for the south-western wall, build up to full speed ahead, and watch out for a whirlpool effect in the centre, and an anticlockwise current after that. I'd like to hit it on full power, maintaining it until we're well into the storm. We can only hold that for not more than ten minutes, then we must reduce to three-quarter speed. Come what may, unless it's imperative, those revolutions should not be exceeded. Remember, ten minutes – no more unless we have to. I'll put my watch on it. She's yours, Eric.'

With that *The Viking* began to throb, while the twin propellers spewed out underwater streamers of coiling sea water at the stern, churning and bubbling as they touched in patterned twists. It took surprisingly little time to cross the eight hundred metres or so; but then, as they neared the sheet of whirling water ahead, Vickery looked down and saw Grace Geldart clinging to the ship's rail on the port side, while holding tightly onto Ruth.

Cursing in frustrated fury, Vickery snatched up the tannoy again and bellowed, 'Get below immediately. *Now!*'

As he looked down from the bridge, he glimpsed Grace's white face, staring helplessly up at him, pleading, with a fixed and unforgettable mask of frozen horror, love and grim determination. Then they sliced into the wall of storm, and the gale slammed against the starboard beam of *The Viking*, so that she heeled steeply under its impact. At the same time a great wave crashed onto the ship, throwing up a blinding spray from tons of hissing water sweeping down the deck towards the port railings... towards Grace and Ruth. Vickery could see practically nothing below, only perhaps the spectral shapes of three struggling men.

Being on the fringe of the 'eye', the ship staggered under this first and heaviest impact; but that was cold comfort, for when she began to right herself there was no sign of Grace Geldart, only of

young Ruth being held firmly to Maitland's chest, while with him was Paulos, and just ahead Henry Curtis, battling to help each other against the gale-force wind and the weight of streaming sea water, hauling themselves towards the below-decks door before the next giant wave struck. They made it, tugged open the steel door and went below.

'My God!' said Vickery, plainly shattered by the suddenness of what both he and Eric had just seen. They watched helplessly, unable to change in any part the tragedy enacted before their eyes. 'She can only have been swept over the side, or sucked between the railings; and we can't even attempt a rescue!'

'With respect, sir, there can be no blame on yourself. The deck was clear before we hit the storm wall, then I saw the little girl peer out of the door as the wave struck. She was obviously paralysed with fear as the sea caught her dress and legs. Grace followed and grabbed her arm, but the wave was already sweeping thigh high across the deck, and Ruth was torn from her grasp. Without hesitation Grace went after her, catching hold of her by the railings. I saw little more after that due to the flying haze of water, but obviously the three men must have been hot on Grace's heels. She was a brave woman, sir – very brave – for it's plain that she must have passed Ruth to the men and told them to save her. They weren't close enough to each other at that moment, and I doubt they'd have had the time or the strength to pull Grace back as well before the next wave hit us. She must have seen this at the time. Grace Geldart deliberately gave her life to save Ruth.'

Vickery looked at Blythe; he had never seen him look so shocked and serious before, showing a fine side to the man. 'You're right, Eric; and thank you for saying what you did. But I still feel terrible: I saw the look of helpless pleading on her face, and I could do nothing! My eyes aren't as sharp as they used to be when I was your age. But I've never lost a passenger before,' he added sadly, as much against himself as for Grace. 'Perhaps I was wrong in letting them come on deck...'

'No, sir, you weren't,' responded Eric firmly. 'In any case they could have come on deck at any time, as they did in the eye of the storm when it was calm. Anyway, we can't bolt and lock them

below, especially in the sort of weather which could force us to abandon ship with very little notice.'

Vickery nodded; he knew that Blythe was right, just as he knew perfectly well that his own actions which led to this unforeseen disaster had been right, and that Eric was well aware that his Captain knew his decisions to have been correct. But the Master Captain of the Blue Circle Line was due to be retired, and at his age it took longer for him to absorb sudden shocks; yet the seaman in him was deeply ingrained and never faltered. 'Eight minutes, Eric; we're well past the storm wall; ring down to reduce to three-quarter speed, if you please.'

'Aye, aye, sir,' replied Eric with a smile, his more ebullient nature returning with the recovery of Vickery's usual decisive self; his lapse having been short and very understandable. *The Viking* slowed a little, but kept on course, even in the battering wind and waves.

Vickery left the bridge to see to his shaken passengers, and to confirm that Eric's observations had been correct. They had all changed into dry clothing, while Pietro had taken care of Ruth in Grace's cabin, making sure that the stunned little girl was dry before changing into her spare set of clothes; after which they returned to the lounge where Vickery found them. He looked over to where Ruth was on the sofa next to Pietro, young and vulnerable in spite of Pietro's shielding presence, and saw the shock and pain in her rigid posture. She sat, round-eyed and quiet from the impact of the rapid series of events that had brought about this terrible tragedy, arising solely from her curiosity. Vickery felt very sorry for the child, who had never realised the strength of gale-force winds, nor the weight in a sweeping wall of sea water; maddened elements far beyond her small strength. He spoke briefly to the three men, and what he learned confirmed virtually all that Eric Blythe had seen and deduced. After which there was nothing more to be said, for in the seemingly unending storm this could well be everyone's last night: thoughts and doubts which he kept to himself.

Perhaps there was little more to be said; for no one on the ship knew much about Grace Geldart, other than she was born in South Africa. In fact Grace was not yet ten years of age when her

mother died. She had never been strong, but a bite from a puff adder on their small farm, with no anti-snake-bite serum to hand, proved to be fatal.

Her mother's death led to a train of events: Grace's father was a strong but single-minded man, and when he married he gave his young and attractive wife all the unrequited, pent-up love and devotion that boiled within him; so much so that he became fanatically possessive, and her loss sent him into a deep depression. He lost interest in the farm they had built up from the raw bush, which soon began to show signs of neglect. Grace, forlorn without her mother, tried to attach herself to her distant father; but he resented her presence anywhere near him, a resentment that soon grew into a frustrated ferocity, until she became frightened of his increasingly frequent outbursts. At length, he realised the dragging depth of his own depression, and sent Grace to England to be cared for and brought up by a married aunt, his wife's sister, who already had a family of her own.

Grace's aunt was not at all like her mother. Furthermore, there had been some misunderstanding between Grace's father and her aunt about how long she was to stay, and regarding funds for her upkeep. When she realised that she was expected to bring up Grace as one of her own, with no funds forthcoming from her brother-in-law, a growing anger, resentment and antipathy towards the child hardened the already mean streak in her nature, which in turn festered and spread to her own children. Life for Grace became unbearable under the stinging hatred and baiting from two of her aunt's three children. She was made to feel like a stranger and an unpaid servant in the house, so was excited and relieved when one day her aunt called her in, and with the sweetness of dripping honey, said that she was going to a very special school; a school that turned out to be 'a very special orphanage'!

And so it came about; but Grace was glad of the change, since here nobody hated, resented or bullied her. For the first time since the death of her mother she found some affection, and a great deal of care. She never again saw her aunt, nor heard from her father. In later years she learnt that he had sold the farm soon

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after she had sailed for England; after which his trail ran dry. Bearing in mind the past and the way he had feared and hated to have her near him, Grace never pursued the matter further. Her father could have found her had he wished, for it would have been a simple matter to have contacted her aunt, but he never did.

This final rift in her close family affected Grace deeply, but she had been forced to accept the fact that from the day of her mother's death, she had in effect become an orphan. There were many others in the orphanage with varying backgrounds, but in essence not dissimilar to her own. As she grew up the impact of being on her own in the world swelled into a vacuum of inner loneliness, and a great need for love. Grace had recognised in Ruth all the hallmarks of an orphan, and remembered from that first day in Rio how she had felt a special kinship with the child. And what an uplifting joy it had been to have gone shopping for their clothes in Rio, how she had hurried off the ship for her two charges before it sailed! From one orphan to another – it was this great need in her that sparked her love for Ruth; certainly it was from this growing love and need to care that Grace had willingly sacrificed herself to save Ruth's life.

From one watch to another, the long night passed slowly. In the engine room it was hard enough with two hours on and four off, while on the bridge it was two hours on and two off under storm conditions, though in fact Vickery took two hour-long watches himself, and the bo'sun or his stand-in, George Bowen, spent much of their time on the bridge. In spite of hot mugs of sugared cocoa brought around by either Harry Shaw or Luis Romero, they were very weary. On a later visit to check on the passengers, Vickery found them resting in their cabins – all except for Pietro, who was gazing out of the porthole at the wild scene before him with a reflective, faraway air. Strangely detached and impenetrable... almost as though he was one with the storm, thought Vickery, at the same time wondering at himself and his wayward imagination.

Some years before, a tannoy system had been installed in *The Viking*; just why this had been included on an old ship was not quite clear, but it had been put in on the whim of the Managing

Director at that time; and not only in *The Viking*, but on all the Blue Circle Line ships. It had proved to be useful, but so far not essential, for it could be individualised to all the main parts of the ship, or used collectively to be heard by everyone. Vickery had used it very little, for he felt it to be impersonal and intrusive; but now, bearing in mind the stresses they were under, and the very real possibility of having to order all on board to abandon ship with little warning, he blessed that director's eccentric whim.

The crew was well organised, so that the deck-hands were able to snatch an hour or so on their bunks. It was not nearly enough, but Vickery had made these breaks obligatory, for he knew very well that men's minds and reactions become blurred and sluggish without sleep. He felt a gnawing uneasiness about *The Viking's* age and general seaworthiness, from her tired engines to her general wear and tear. He had done all that was possible to cope with this rare cyclonic storm, but the simple facts of it were that the ship was outdated, underpowered, heavily barnacled, and not up to coping with such fierce winds and wildly turbulent seas; it was a miracle they had managed to last as long as they had without being capsized or driven under, or that some vital part had not broken or been carried away. Vickery was thankful for the tons of pig iron he had long since had installed in the lowest depths of the ship, acting as a stabilising keel in heavy seas.

The long night passed slowly. On helm duty were Boris Kanlewski and Louis Jardine, both strongly built men, and both locked in battle with the wheel, holding *The Viking* from swinging to port, thereby riding askew, slave to the twisting waves and the power of the gale from the north-eastern bank of maddened wind and wave. Jakes was on the bridge at about 4.30 a.m., worn but alert, when the gale began to show signs of fluctuating. It was still dark, but through the clouds of spray and heaving seas, he could just see a lightening of the sky in the east, heralding the dawn of another day. He wondered if this division between night and day would break this storm; not always so, but he had noticed before that weather patterns often changed around the cusp of night and day.

Unnoticed by Jakes in the maelstrom, the bo'sun appeared at his side, seemingly fresh and tireless. It was remarkable how little

rest Jakes had managed to snatch, yet at just that moment how little he wanted Hamish Ferguson to take over from him. 'What do you make of it, sir? Seems different to me.'

'Gale's fluctuating slightly, bo'sun; could be a sign that we're close to breaking through the western rim of the storm. You'll notice, too, how there's more force needed to starboard the helm to keep us on course against the keenest currents; this could be another sign that we're near its rim. I'm a little surprised that nothing has given way; the steering cables or pins, for instance, have been under tremendous tension for hours on end, and not a steady pressure either.'

Jakes was more apprehensive than he would normally have cared to admit, or he would never have voiced his thoughts to the bo'sun, for like most sailors he was just a little superstitious about the possibility of bad luck following in the footsteps of his words.

Moments later maddened nature struck. Jakes saw it dead ahead: a high semi-translucent sheet of broken water, spinning across their bows in a turbulence of shattered sea and spume, which both men recognised as the probable western fringe of the storm. As *The Viking* broke through this swirling haze, the wind battered and screamed like a banshee from hell, striking their starboard beam with unbelievable force. At the same time the sea rose higher, and again from their starboard side a giant wave rolled invincibly towards the ship, towered over their heads, then curled and broke, crashing down on to the already battered vessel with a thunderous roar. She staggered and heeled under the huge dual impact of wind and wave, their combined weight forcing *The Viking* over until her port-side rails were pressed below the raging sea.

Clinging to the bridge railing, Jakes and the bo'sun were tensely aware that the ship might not be able to recover, but would keep on rolling until she capsized. Slowly the inclinometer needle swung round, beyond the designers' safety limit; further, and yet further, until it touched 50°. At that point the old ship shuddered and fought back until, like a great whale rising from the deeps, she began to right herself. At the same time, as in a giant lift, the mountainous wave carried the ship up and up, until at the limit of tolerance, on the peak of the wave, in the full blast

of hurtling gale-torn spume, *The Viking's* riveted plates screaming in protest, relief came as she began to slide down into its pit, temporarily sheltered from the hell-borne blast of the gale. There she swung back and spilled the remaining burden of sea water, which poured through her scuppers and between the railings, until she recovered her equilibrium.

Momentarily stunned, Jakes looked down to where the port lifeboat should be, but was not: the force of the huge wave with the screaming gale had torn it from its stays, leaving the lifeboat swinging freely on its main cradle, then pulled it below the waves as *The Viking* rolled steeply to port. The weight of water in the boat, multiplied many times by its acting as a drogue from being dragged under the turbulent sea by the ship, had together been too much for the two main supports, and the lifeboat had been ripped from its supporting cradle and swept away.

It took less than a minute for them to pass through the storm's western wall, but in that short time *The Viking* had sustained some heavy damage: Jakes had also been aware of a distinct crack from the bridge mountings; but the greatest damage lay ahead, where the final hammer blow from the giant wave had smashed in the forrard cargo hatchway, allowing tons of sea water to pour in; then there was the loss of one of their two lifeboats. He looked at the bo'sun, who had seen the dual damage, and pointed to both. Without a word he left the bridge to organise repairs as well as possible under the appalling conditions, and with what facilities they had available. Jakes reached for the tannoy.

'Emergency repair team to Mr Ferguson; repair to forrard cargo hatch, and additional rope to strengthen the starboard lifeboat's cradle. He may need a spare tarpaulin; bring one with you. Move smartly now!' Jakes spoke crisply, but without any note of undue urgency. Then Vickery was beside him. Age notwithstanding, the man was incredible, even if he did look drawn, Jakes thought in some admiration.

'Good deal of chaos below,' said Vickery. 'Thought it would be more peaceful up here! Quite some blast you came through, Bill; but rough as it is, at least we're hopefully leaving that twister behind. Thank heavens one lifeboat can carry the whole crew; a bit crowded, but a comforting thought if we do have to abandon ship!'

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Jakes couldn't help but smile at his Captain and friend; his easy manner in the face of a near-fatal catastrophe was a tonic in itself. He gestured towards the smashed-in cargo hatchway, 'But not without considerable damage, I fear. The bridge structure, too, has been fractured somewhere; there was an almighty crack when that wave hit us, but I haven't the time to see where the break is. These adventures aren't improving the beauty of your ship, sir,' he replied in a manner matching Vickery's.

They watched as the bo'sun and five men dragged a new tarpaulin cover over the whole cargo hatchway, pulling the two together to give as much sea-proof resistance as possible to the outer cover, lashing them down as one to the hooks in the deck. This work was being carried out under dangerous and slippery conditions as, with almost monotonous regularity, curling waves crashed down, streaming over the deck with leg-sweeping force; at such times they had to hang on to the railings or deck fastenings to avoid being lifted off their feet and swept overboard. At the same time two other men were employed in lashing the starboard lifeboat more securely to its cradle.

Vickery felt a surge of pride as he watched them, for these were true sailors, able to work under conditions that most young and virile men would find too daunting even to attempt. However, it was impossible to support a part of the hatch cover itself, for a sizeable corner of the metal-strutted wood had been smashed inwards, and with cargo on board there was no way into the hold save through the hatch cover itself. Hopefully their repairs would be sufficient to keep out the main wash from breaking waves; meanwhile the pumps would have to handle as best they could any flooding in the hold.

'I'd like to have given our chaps some shelter from the storm's fringe, but we're still too close to risk a quarter turn, north or south. Anyway, they've very nearly finished; another minute, two at the most,' Vickery said, a reflective note in his voice. He paused, and then more firmly to Jakes, 'Leave the rest of your watch to me, Bill; I want you to go below and check if any of the passengers have been hurt, then the galley for damage, lastly congratulate the bo'sun and his team on fine makeshift jobs, and ask him to step this way when he's finished.'

Jakes acknowledged his Captain's orders, left the bridge and went below. The passengers were shaken up, but apart from the shock the only one who had been injured was Henry Curtis: he had been standing at the time the giant wave struck, and was thrown off balance by the violent movement and angle of the floor, striking his head and an arm against the bulkhead. He complained only of a bruise to his head, but Jakes noticed that he looked unusually pale, and was holding his left arm, bent and close to his body.

'Would you like to see Luis Romero? He's our medic on board.'

'No need, Mr Jakes,' Curtis replied. 'You've quite enough trouble on your hands, and I imagine that Luis is sweeping up trays of broken crockery right now. Kind of you to ask, but this will soon pass.'

When Jakes went onto the galley, he found that both Romero and Shaw had stacked and blocked the crockery so well that in fact there had been very little damage; but he took the opportunity to send Luis off with his medical bag to see Henry Curtis, in spite of his considerate waiving of the matter. Jakes then looked for the bo'sun, confirmed that all was as well as could be expected in respect of the starboard lifeboat and the cargo hatch, passed him the Captain's message, and then went wearily to his cabin for as long a rest as his duties and the wild seas would allow.

After Jakes had gone, Pietro left Ruth with Jim Maitland, who was telling her some of the exciting adventures in which he had been involved. Maitland felt for the little girl who, in all innocence, had been the cause of Grace Geldart's death, and who had been very quiet and withdrawn since that dreadful time. Curtis had also been worried about Ruth; but while he was very attached to her and felt responsible for her future welfare, even more now that Grace had gone – or perhaps because of her death – an inexplicable shyness had arisen between himself and Ruth, which troubled him further, and made him feel inadequate: a situation that Mary would have quickly clarified and teased out of him! At any rate he was pleased to see a sparkle of interest and life in her with Maitland; be it only for an hour, it was at least a start

on the road to healing, although he knew well enough that Ruth would never forget Grace's supreme sacrifice to save her life.

Although Henry's left arm and shoulder were painful and stiff from being thrown heavily against a steel bulkhead, he knew that Luis Romero's kindly attentions would not help, so he sent him back with thanks and a warm smile. Then Pietro was with him, laying a gentle hand on his left shoulder. Curtis looked up, and almost immediately felt a wonderfully relaxing sensation tingling through his whole being; in that moment his cares were put aside. He looked into Pietro's glowing eyes, and felt his strange and uniquely magnetic personality. What was this? Something he had never come across before, and yet he had been close to this unusual boy for several days, even to him sharing his cabin. Henry felt surging through him a great love for this child. He should have seen this before, but Mary's accident and death had so bruised his feelings that he had been blinded to much else. Everything since had, in a sense, been diversionary, even to the finding and escape from the slums in Rio de Janeiro, the three-day voyage to Montevideo and, with Grace, the wonderful day the four of them had at the boating lake with George and his hand-crafted motor boat and yacht. No matter how far back he cast his mind, Henry was never so aware of how smoothly destiny had cunningly shaped his life.

When they left Montevideo the following night, there had been a sense of heaviness in the air preceding the great storm, from which there had been little time to think with any degree of clarity.

Henry looked back at the all too brief times he had spent with Pietro and Ruth. He had felt close to them; even so, it had been predominantly a case of 'in loco parentis'. He remembered how before they had found the boating pond they had skirted some of the city with its hotchpotch of people, the noisy and dusty time they had spent in the port at Montevideo, the men who made up the populace around the docks, and the friendly reactions of the dockers themselves, along with those on board *The Viking*.

Ever since the searing pain of Mary's tragic death barely six months before, Henry had sunk deeper within himself, avoiding any attachments that might even slightly impinge on the deep love

he would always have for his beloved wife. Some might cynically say it was a foolish reaction; others wiser would understand. But now this boy, Pietro, had penetrated his defences; stranger still, Henry felt that his bleeding heart and mind lay open to him, and none of the defences he could put up had any effect at all. He should feel angry at himself, discomfited, or at least annoyed; but in fact he felt only love for the boy, and a strange peace of mind that he had not enjoyed since Mary had been taken from him. He did not even seek to ask who Pietro really was. It was enough to feel that he was what he was.

'Your arm is injured. Let me help.' With those simple words Pietro placed his left hand on Henry's elbow.

It was neither sudden nor delayed. Henry could feel the life and flexibility flowing back into his arm. The pain was taken away. At the same time he felt a great burden being lifted from him, but while his mind was at ease, yet his love for Mary, her picture before his eyes, was undiminished, but without the agony of loss. In an inexplicable way, he felt her presence closer to him than ever before since her death, and with it the sure knowledge that they would soon be together again; although how soon that would be he could not tell. To know was sufficient in itself.

On the spur of the moment, Henry reached up and drew Pietro down to him, the boy's dark hair against his greying temples, and gave him a gentle kiss on his cheek, saying quietly, but with deep feeling, 'Will you be with me always?'

Pietro's warm eyes shone, 'As long as always is, I'll be with you,' he replied.

Five: Cape Vírgenes

The roaring gale was easing a trifle as they gradually left the cyclonic storm behind. Only a few miles, but both wind and wave flow were already turning eastwards and driving from the ENE, lifting and twisting *The Viking* forwards from the stern on her WSW course. The near following air and sea currents made it easier for the crew, especially for those below. But on the bridge it was very different; the huge waves remained threateningly high, and when the stern was swept up in a forward surge from any of these giants, there was the constant danger of the ship being twisted aside as the rudder's grip lessened in the resulting slack water; or driven bows under in the sunken pit of the same power, while another wave rose to loom threateningly again over the stern. It would take many hours for the seas to calm after such a furious turbulence, dispersing its energies over many sea miles.

Eric Blythe was on bridge watch, but in spite of his comparative youth the long hours had taken their toll, and tired smudges showed under his eyes. But he was born to the sea, and with over fifteen years in a variety of ships, he was hardened to unexpected spates of long hours on watch when duty and necessity called. Beside him was George Bowen, standing in as deputy bo'sun, ready for any emergency that called for his skills; while in front of them, behind the binnacle, the helm was still manned by two seamen. Freshly rested manpower was short on the ship, for neither the Captain, and certainly not the Blue Circle Shipping Line, had anticipated such a knife-edge battle with the furious forces of nature. In any event they were fully manned as regards seamen's quarters.

Eric wondered if he dare reduce the two helmsmen on duty to the normal one, but keep the changes to half an hour as arranged when they had first hit the storm; all of which seemed to be years ago when they had first been drawn in by the cyclone's tentacles.

At the same time he thought to himself, How apparently futile it is for puny man to contend, and hope to overcome, howling winds, vast waves and crashing seas! All he could do was to go with such unleashed powers, go in the role of servant, using his sea-going experience and skills to ride out forces that in a moment could crush little man-made ships.

‘What do you think, Mr Bowen?’ he asked really as a mirror to his speeding thoughts, for he had already made up his mind.

He looked puzzled. ‘About what, sir?’

‘About reducing the helmsmen to one, but keeping the changes to thirty minutes each for the time being. There’s less weight on the helm now; flexibility and quick reactions are needed, and these call for our best helmsmen. Tell Dawlish to go below, and leave Kanlewski on until his replacement is due; I’ll talk to him. Meanwhile go below and make out a fresh roster, listing only our most capable helmsmen; I think you’ll find there are six, seven if we include yourself in an emergency. If you have any problems, stir our bo’sun from his bunk of ease, and he’ll help you out.’

Bowen left on his duty mission, and Eric Blythe stepped forward to have a word on the current helm problems with Boris Kanlewski, their only Russian crewman, but one of the best seamen they had, coming as he did from the far north, where the waters were cold, rough and treacherous.

Vickery stomped his way up to the bridge; he had managed to grab a couple of hours’ rest, and now appeared fresh and hardy.

‘Morning, sir,’ said Eric, impressed by the old man’s tough energy, and gave him a full rundown of the situation, along with the changes he had made to cope with their current situation.

Vickery nodded in response, glanced at the ship’s compass, noted the angled wind and sea flow, and the change to a single helmsman. ‘Well done, Eric,’ he said, ‘you’re handling our changing situation just fine. I know you’re watching out for the stern twist, currently our most vulnerable point. If we are turned, don’t hesitate to use the engines, both on full power if necessary; we can’t afford to be broadside onto this sea. We should be able to keep to our WSW course.’ He paused for a few moments. ‘We can’t read our position at present, but I reckon we’re not far from

land and the Straits of Magellan. What's your view, Eric?

'I think you're probably right, sir,' Eric replied. 'But wind and sea are still too powerful for my peace of mind, especially on engines limited to three-quarter speed. Then, too, should these weather conditions continue, even on a moderated level, we would have a frightful battle in the westerlies and the Straits, a real boiling pot of trouble.' Eric had spoken out vehemently, which was not his normal way, and this troubled him slightly, so he added, 'But it's not my business, and I hope you didn't mind me speaking out so frankly, sir.'

Vickery knew well enough that Eric's nerves were taut; but at the same time he appreciated his views and fears. So he replied, 'Not at all, my boy; I asked for your views, and I value them. A Captain should always be ready to put before his senior officers any controversial decisions he might have in mind; with all the experience in the world, one can't always be right... The sea is a fickle mistress! However, in our current situation your ideas are in line with my own. As for entering the Straits of Magellan, I have no intention of putting the ship, and the lives of all those on board, at risk merely to carry a cargo to Valparaiso.'

'Two thoughts to bear in mind: our engines are old, and I can no longer rely on them, especially under the cyclonic conditions we've been experiencing, and the westerlies if we attempted to round the Horn. Although the chief would hate to admit it, I'm not even sure of being able to maintain three-quarter speed; I'm uncomfortable without some reliable reserve power in hand. Secondly, we cannot be certain just how much unseen damage *The Viking* has suffered during the last two days; the ship has taken a terrible pounding. I've been her Captain for several years; in that time one gets an intimate feel of a ship, and I don't feel easy about her. But I'll say no more at present.'

Eric had rarely known his Captain to display his thoughts so freely, or to talk so unrestrainedly on any sea-going matters that troubled him. He was touched, particularly in view of the fact that he was well known and highly respected in shipping circles for his nautical abilities and sound judgment.

Before Eric could think of a suitable reply, Vickery spoke again, but on a crisper note. 'Keep a sharp lookout for land ahead;

it could be in sight within an hour or two. When this is sighted, by yourself or Bill, I must be told at once.'

He turned to leave the bridge, but from his peripheral vision he caught a glimpse of Blythe saluting him; this was rarely done on a merchant vessel, and was a mark of Eric's genuine respect for his Captain. In spite of his seniority, Vickery was a shy man, so for a moment he was caught off balance. He took three strides to the top step leading from the bridge, then turned, looked Eric straight in the eyes, and said briefly, 'Thank you, Mr Blythe,' before leaving.

Every huge wave that angled at *The Viking's* stern was a test in skill and alertness, easing slightly as wind and wave slowly swung a few points from the east, but it called for constant alertness from both the officer on duty and the helmsman; so when Bill Jakes came to take over thirty minutes later, it was with a sigh of relief that Eric passed on Vickery's warnings and instructions, and left the bridge for a short spell of rest.

Before they had been caught in the cyclonic storm, the bo'sun had been able to relieve both officers for short periods; but since then this had not been possible as high levels of skill and seamanship were called for. Vickery, who knew his bo'sun's versatile abilities around the ship, was also aware of his limitations on the bridge in command; but for both officers, tough as they were, two hours on and two off was unsustainable for long under conditions of continual alertness; their nerves were frayed, knowing that a small error of judgment could be irrecoverable, even fatal.

It was just after 7 a.m.; Ted Hudson, another very competent helmsman, had taken over the helm from Kanlewski. The sun was not yet warm enough to burn away the distant haze that lay on the horizon. With his body swaying on the heaving deck, Jakes cursed softly to himself as he looked ahead through the bridge binoculars. Blurred by the mist, he tried to make out if a narrow strip of a darker hue on the horizon was the outline of land ahead, knowing that such impressions could be as transitory and misleading as mirages in a desert. He would have to wait until they were closer, which irritated him, for like Eric he was also feeling the strain, and his patience was at a low ebb.

Four slow turns up and down the bridge deck and he'd have

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another look; but on turning on the starboard side, he heard the ominous sound of grinding metal: he remembered the loud crack on the port side, and the bridge housing shifting slightly as they passed through the westerly curtain of the cyclone; normally he would have had the damage inspected and rectified far sooner, but hours of vicious gales had made this impossible, and repairs were postponed. He stooped and peered at the spot where the grinding came from, then with growing alarm followed the twisted or broken joints and bolts from fore to aft.

He stood up and reached for the tannoy, cutting out the passenger quarters. 'Bo'sun to the bridge!' he called, and again, 'bo'sun to the bridge!'

Jakes felt a sense of guilt, for as first mate he should have dealt with this problem long before; now the weakness had extended until the bridge housing was only being held down in part on the starboard, fore and aft sides. He took no comfort from the fact that there had been other more urgent emergencies at around the same time: the crushing of a corner of the forrard cargo hatch, along with the loss of their port-side lifeboat, when they had been struck by a massive wave as they broke through the west wall of the cyclone; nor that he and others were not machines, but punch-drunk humans, weary to the bone from hours of struggling with massive seas, and howling force 12 gales since they had been drawn into this storm.

The bo'sun arrived on the bridge in double-quick time, cool and unhurried; he was known for his uncannily swift appearances and disappearances, taking an almost impish delight in this harmless but useful quirk. Jakes showed him where he had first seen the sheared or twisted joints, leaving him to inspect the rest while he picked up the binoculars again to scan the horizon. Yes, he had been right; the morning mist had cleared sufficiently to show the outlines of land dead ahead. He removed the stopper to the sound pipe that led directly to the Captain's cabin and blew down it to get Vickery's attention, but with no response; so he called his name, with the same negative result. Jakes was not surprised; he reached for the tannoy, adjusted it to cover all the working sections in the ship, and spoke down it. 'Captain to the bridge, if you please; Captain to the bridge.'

By this time, another helmsman's watch had passed, and he saw that Archie Sinclair had the wheel. Good, though not his first choice, he thought, as he stepped across the bridge to have a word with him, making sure that he was fully aware how to handle the following waves, and not to let his attention wander for a second, concluding with, 'Remember that for a while with the surge of any of these very large waves, you have the power of the wave going with the thrust from the propellers, which leaves us for a spell in slack water around the rudder, with little or no steerage way; be sure the ship is lined up like an arrow before any following wave, leaving it no vantage to swing our stern and throw us beam on. Bit tricky... Think you can handle it?'

'Yes, sir, I'll manage fine! Don't worry about me; I'll not let her stray, sir.' With his freckled face and boyish grin, Archie looked ridiculously young for his twenty-two years of age, with four of them at sea. He was the only crew member who had attained a high enough standard at school and sixth-form college to allow him entry to university, although nobody knew why he had never taken advantage of this chance. Unless offered, it was not customary for any of the crew to probe into their shipmates' private lives.

Jakes smiled at him. 'I'm certain you're capable; if you were not, I wouldn't rely on you, which includes all of us on board.'

Vickery's head appeared above the top rung of the steps to the bridge, and soon, feet firmly planted, body moving effortlessly to counter the heavy pitching and rolling of *The Viking*, his sharp blue eyes looked ahead at the streak of land on the horizon. 'I take it this is why you called me onto the bridge, Bill – to view the horizon?' he said with a hint of humour in his voice.

But Jakes was tired and slow on the uptake, so he looked a little puzzled and slightly hurt. 'Your last standing order, sir, was to report to you when we sighted land,' he replied. 'There's also the bridge housing, which the bo'sun is still checking; he's better qualified to report on the damage.'

Vickery was quick to sense Jake's jaded sense of humour under the continual strain. 'Never mind my poorly timed jokes, Bill; of course I left a standing order to let me know as soon as land was sighted ahead. Both you and Eric are doing a good job

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under hellish conditions, as indeed are the crew, both in the engine room and elsewhere. We'd have gone down long ago had it not been so; while our chief sweats it out keeping the props turning, so you two are *The Viking's* controlling and guiding eyes and ears. Anyway, let's have a closer look at the horizon; it looks familiar to me.' Saying which he took up the binoculars and studied the distant land, sweeping both north and south as far as could be seen.

Jakes was mollified and, as was his nature, began to blame himself for having foolishly felt injured by his Captain's levity.

'Yes,' said Vickery, putting down the binoculars and breaking into Jake's thoughts of self-condemnation. 'There, slightly left of centre, is Cape Vírgenes, which protrudes as an outer gateway to the Magellan Straits. How far do you think we are from that coastline, Bill?'

'Ten miles, maybe twelve,' said Jakes, scanning the horizon. 'But it's hard to say with much degree of accuracy with the light haze drifting over the land; also we can only sight the coast while we're riding high on these waves.'

'Just so, but while we're on the crest of these waves, we cannot be less than eighty feet above sea level, even more, taking into account the loaded ship and the height of the bridge above a calm sea. I think it's a trifle further, perhaps fifteen miles; anyway, time enough to see how wind and wave are behaving nearer the coast.' Vickery stayed on the bridge, for there were critical choices soon to be made. He turned his attention to the bo'sun, who had completed his damage inspection of the bridge housing.

'How is it, bo'sun?'

'Not good, sir, not good at all. Forrard, port and stern housing joints and bolts are either weakened, rusted, or broken through. The starboard side is not too bad. It's a bloomin' miracle that it hasn't blown away before now!'

'Wind's angling between the starboard and stern,' put in Jakes.

'Right, sir.' Then addressing both officers, 'With two men I could fix up wire stays on the port side, and if there's time another couple at the stern. Take a couple of hours though; the deck fastenings need to be renewed completely to be able to take any appreciable strain, after which the bridge housing will be

reasonably secure. It's really a dockyard job, sir; the best we can do would only be temporary makeshift work.'

'That's all right, bo'sun,' Vickery replied, 'your makeshift jobs are always better than you make them out to be. Carry on as you see fit; but I suggest you deal with the forrard and port sides first; they appear to be the most vital.'

With a nautical roll, the bo'sun made off to collect whatever he needed, along with two of the most suitable men.

Jakes was the first to speak. 'I can see us managing without the bridge housing, but if we do go through the Straits, I'd be mighty apprehensive in the westerlies with only a holding-down job. Not as bad as what we've been through, or even now,' he added reflectively, 'and the likely winds should be less from the starboard, the side on which the bridge housing has the strongest mountings.'

'My thoughts exactly,' responded Vickery, 'but we've got forty minutes or more before I need to make a final decision. I have it in mind to lie off-shore while we see how successful the bo'sun is in fixing this housing. I don't anticipate taking her through the Straits with our engines in the condition they are, Bill.'

'Within five miles of the coast I want you, or Eric if he's on bridge duty by then, to turn the ship due north, slow to half-speed. It won't be easy, for quite regardless of the dying storm behind us, the currents anywhere near Cape Vírgenes are unstable and turbulent with unexpected vortexes. Just restating what you already know. I must go below.'

With that the Captain left on his rounds to inspect the ship, and then to see his crew and the passengers; nothing that could be checked must be left to chance; but all the time his thoughts ran over the decision he'd soon have to make: north to Montevideo, or even to Rio if the directors of the Blue Circle Shipping Line preferred; but not south through the Straits... James Vickery's mind ran through the possible consequences of the two main courses of action before him. If *The Viking* had been in better condition, it would have been his duty to carry on to Valparaiso; but she wasn't, and as Captain, the final choice lay with him alone. The owners were not a bad lot, but profit was their main interest; far more so, he reckoned sadly, than the lives and welfare

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of those on board, or of the ship and its cargo; both were expendable, being fully insured by Lloyd's in the event of loss at sea. This was his last voyage; ahead lay retirement and a pension, possibly with a golden handshake for long service.

So ran Vickery's mind; but to his credit his primary concern was for the safety of those on board, and the idea of a pension, bonus and retirement weighed not at all against these overriding issues. He felt, too, that he owed a heavy debt to all on board for ever letting *The Viking* get caught in the cyclonic storm in the first place; with engines overdue for an overhaul, and even though it had been night when they had left Montevideo, with the darkness obscuring conditions ahead, and no radio warning of an exceptionally heavy storm to the south. Vickery was well aware of all these factors; but in spite of them, and the rarity of cyclonic storms, his self-critical nature and innate humility discounted the virtual impossibility of accurately assessing the rightness of his actions.

In fact he had a fine sense of judgment following a lifetime of seafaring experience; at such times he tended to forget that while the sea was his mistress, the oceans magnificent, beautiful and embracing, yet this very mistress could rise up with unexpected and treacherous intent, so cunning as to deceive even the most experienced of seamen. In its latent power and depths lay its many moods: but Vickery had become uncertain of himself; he felt his age, and drew no comfort from logic, or from an old man's foolish, romanticising dreams.

He went first to see how his passengers were getting on, to find them in their cabins, sorting and reducing their luggage to a minimum in case they would have to take to a lifeboat. Ruth was with Henry Curtis and Pietro, her few small possessions lying on the floor. They were tired and apprehensive about the outcome of the storm, hence the repacking of essentials. Until *The Viking* was nearer to Cape Vírgenes, Vickery still had no absolutely clear course of action in mind, so he passed between the three occupied cabins with reassuring words for them all; but said nothing further other than they had been clear of the cyclonic storm for some time, and that the huge following seas were merely the aftermath, which should diminish in due course; furthermore,

that Cape Vírgenes lay dead ahead, and that he hoped to find shelter in the long shallow bay that lay to its north.

As he was leaving them, he caught Pietro's eyes on him, steady and unfathomable, but somehow reassuring. Strangely, in that moment his self-doubts were eased; his indecisiveness and his mental turmoil while he was leaving the bridge, all were straightened, his mind at peace with whatever course of action he would have to take. He had no wish even to question the boy's unusual powers, but accepted them with a warm smile before passing onto the galley, en route to the engine room.

He clambered down the iron rungs into the warm and humid air, to find that Mactavish was not there – rare even under normal conditions, but no man is made of steel. He gestured to Donald McWhirter, the chief's senior and most experienced marine engineer. 'How are the engines?' he asked. 'Are we still restricted to three-quarter speed? Do you think they'll stand up to going through the Straits, rounding the Horn, McWhirter?'

McWhirter looked shrewdly at the Captain for a short while before replying, 'Those are three very pointed questions, sir; I'm not sure that I should attempt to answer them in the chief's absence.'

'Nonsense, Donald, you're qualified and experienced. Anyway, I'm doing you the compliment of asking for your opinion, which I'm pretty sure will concur with the chief's. If I meet with Mr Mactavish on the way up, I'll put the same questions to him. I'll soon have to make some vital decisions which will affect our next destination; more hangs on the state of our engines than any other part of our ship.'

'Right, sir, I understand. In my opinion both engines are long overdue for a full overhaul, particularly this one,' he said, indicating the port-side engine. 'On both engines I can hear several of the minor bearings either grinding slightly or knocking; I'm also wary of at least one of the main bearings, big end, sir. In short, the chief said a maximum of three-quarter speed, and I can only agree with his directive; but at the same time I know that he, and I too, would not recommend taking *The Viking* round the Horn and onto Valparaiso. Frankly, as you insist, sir, in my view I'd recommend limping back to Montevideo on half speed.'

Grinning broadly, Chief Engineer Gordon Mactavish stepped out from behind a metal pillar exclaiming, 'Well done, Donald; I couldn't have put it better myself!'

Vickery was briefly taken aback. 'You sly old devil!' he said, grinning. 'How long have you been listening?'

McWhirter slid silently away back to the drumming machinery. Mactavish replied, 'Long enough to hear Donald's report on our engines. He's a good man; knows his stuff.'

'And do you fully agree with his assessment?'

'Indeed I do; but he only gave you a summary of the main problems: there's a lot of string and sticking plaster holding us together; all quite minor, but they need constant watching.'

'And you recommend half speed?' Vickery asked finally.

'Well, James, I think Donald was being a mite overcautious; but three-quarter speed should be our maximum. If later you can reduce a wee bit it'd make it that much easier to keep the engines cooler and running. You're not forgetting other possible sources of wear, such as the bearings on the twin propeller shafts, the steering mechanism, and so on. These and other parts have had a hell of a hammering since we left Montevideo. Under such conditions my six men have been fully stretched and there's been no time to check them out; in fact there's not much point in doing so, since I can't stop the engines, and there's no back-up to *The Viking's* steering.'

'I had already considered these other factors, but they make for depressing thinking, and as you say, under conditions as they are now there's nothing we can do about them.' Vickery glanced at his watch, and shook his head slightly. 'The sea hasn't dropped much, and we must be nearing the coast. Thanks for the chat, Gordon. I must get back to the bridge.'

Vickery's brain was so attuned to the sea and its currents, winds and weather, the seasons and the varying moods of the oceans, that in his mind he had a very sound picture of their situation and position. On returning to the bridge he found his instincts, born of long experience, bore no surprises. Eric was now on watch, and aware of the Captain's last instructions from Jakes. The following waves had moderated slightly, but with an added difficulty in that there was an increasingly strong cross-current angling from the

south west, brought in by the westerlies. With this added factor the helmsman's task was made even trickier.

Vickery told Eric the gist of his conversations with Donald McWhirter and the chief, and went on, 'We're six or seven miles off Cape Vírgenes now; I estimate our speed in these following waves at about eight knots, which in fifteen minutes or so should put us three to four miles off the coast. At about that point we'll change course, angling into the more sheltered bay north of Cape Vírgenes; after which it should be easier to turn north back to Montevideo, or to São Paulo or Rio if necessary. We need to come in fairly close to the coastline before turning north. With the counter-current and the closeness to land, these huge following seas should break up and lessen still further, making it safer and easier to turn near broadside on. You understand that we really have no choice. Are you with me, Eric?'

'Yes, indeed, sir. A hard decision to have had to make; the owners won't like it. Regardless of the fact that you have no other option, their minds are almost exclusively wrapped around their profit margin. They skimmed on *The Viking's* overhaul before sailing more than four months ago, and with the return of cargo at both Montevideo and Rio, and repairs to the engines, I fear you may not remain their senior Captain, sir. On the other hand,' Eric remarked with a touch of bitterness, 'if we go down, they collect both the value of the ship and its cargo at the time, while we...!'

He was getting quite worked up; for along with most sailors, he hated the clash of opposing interests between ships' owners and their crews, with the minds of the former set primarily on trade, which extended into the minimum maintenance on their vessels, so putting at risk the seaworthiness of some of their older ships; let alone the safety and welfare of the crews and passengers. It was a one-sided marriage between greed and service that almost invariably favoured the god of Commerce.

'I know,' replied Vickery in a calming tone. 'There's nothing we can do about it; certainly not at this stage. I'll take over on the bridge for a while: I want to send three messages, and you're best at handling our radio transmitter. But first confer with the chief in the engine room; get him to make notes on what essential work is required, and what parts he'll need; stress that he must keep to

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essentials. After which I want you to draft two identical copies to the port authorities in Rio and Montevideo with all the chief's details on parts, facilities for repairs, the time needed, and the approximate cost; add that their earliest reply would be appreciated.

'The third message, which I have here, is to the Blue Circle Shipping Line; it explains our dilemma, and accentuates the grave risks to the ship, the crew and our passengers if we attempt to circumnavigate the Horn to Valparaiso. Make sure you include a copy of the duplicate messages sent to Rio and Montevideo. I've asked for their confirmation that these steps meet with their approval, and their permission to proceed. Finally, it goes without saying that every message is to be from myself as Captain. You'll appreciate how vital these are. I'd like to get them off as quickly as possible.' Vickery rummaged in his duffel coat pocket for his written draft, and handed it to Eric.

'When you've drafted and sent all these messages, get hold of Harry Shaw, who doubles as our Sparks; tell him to keep an ear open for their replies, and be ready to chase them up if necessary. Plenty to do there, Eric, and very important. Remember, I want final copies of both the transcripts to the port authorities, and my one to the owners, brought to me either here on the bridge, or if Bill has taken over, then I must be found and these transcripts given to me. Replies to these will make interesting reading; of course they'll blame me, but this is one of my burdens as Captain: responsibilities and the flack!' He spoke with no trace of bitterness or cynicism in his voice.

'Aye, aye, sir. I'll see that everything is carried out just as you wish.'

With that, Eric left the bridge in pursuance of Vickery's orders; but as he did so, and on his way to the engine room, his mind was torn; firstly by a twinge of guilt. Ever since the start of the cyclonic storm, both deck officers had been on bridge watch for two hours on and two off, and both he and Jakes were stressed and exhausted, so it was natural that he saw Vickery's radio messages as a welcome break from the unremitting strain; but dominating any temporary relief to himself, Eric could not help worrying about Vickery, and the way the directors of the Blue Circle Shipping Line would treat him after this, without any sense

of fairness: Vickery knew this, yet the greatness of the man was shown in his complete lack of any bitterness.

Vickery noted that Ted Hudson was on helm duty, and gave a brief sigh of relief, for he was one of the best and most experienced men in his crew. Nonetheless, he went over to him and put him into as much of the picture as he needed to know, concluding by saying, 'You see that headland dead ahead? I want you to begin edging the ship to starboard; we're not much more than three miles from it now. Later on I'll call you to starboard the helm; when I do so, I want you to take her round steadily but firmly, a few degrees east of north, keeping roughly parallel to the coast, but never closer than two miles. Now that we're nearer a landmass, the waves have lessened in height and power, but they're shorter, choppier, and with a lot of unpleasant currents under us, which I expect you can feel through the helm.'

'That I can. Don't worry, sir; I'll take her round easy.'

Vickery smiled whimsically to himself: I am getting old; most of my crew seem to look upon me as a father figure, one who has both to be obeyed, but at the same time to be looked after. Well, it's not such a bad epitaph for an old Captain!

A while later, Vickery called out to starboard the helm. As the ship had to come round over ninety degrees, Hudson spun the helm swiftly but firmly, neither wavering nor pausing until the wheel was hard over. The rudder bit, and *The Viking* began to swing round onto her new northerly course. It was beautifully done; the distance from Cape Vírgenes was almost precisely as Vickery had estimated in his head, making the best of the lessening wind and diminishing size of the waves, which were now lifting on their starboard beam. Even so, while both had decreased in force and size, they were still at moderate storm levels, so that she heeled towards the shore, and rose and sank in a sickening motion.

Although Vickery knew these waters, he had checked on his up to date nautical maps for depths, which gave the depth at around fifteen fathoms where they were turning, with no projecting rocks from the seabed; yet when they had almost completed their turn, and as *The Viking* sank deeply in the pit of a larger than normal wave, she suddenly shuddered, and slowed slightly as the stern struck some undersea obstruction. There was a

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harsh sound of grating and rending which, like a giant sounding board, rang through the whole ship. Hudson was flung across the bridge by the back-spinning helm; while from the grinding shock Vickery's mind stood briefly aside from itself, watching helplessly as Ted's body flew through the air in slow motion, taking on a fleeting airborne life of its own.

Then the metallic grinding ceased as suddenly as it had started. Apparently unhurt, Hudson sprang to his feet and in three quick strides grasped the helm; but now it swung freely, first one way, and then the other. He spun the wheel, but it no longer had any link with the rudder; if indeed the rudder was still hanging on the ship's sternpost, or torn off and lying on the seabed. Vickery had already assessed the situation and rang Mactavish to reduce the engines to dead slow, and await orders. He then alerted the bo'sun to go with one of the engineers to inspect the ship's steering cables and report back to him with all speed.

Vickery knew very well that there were no natural snags on the seabed, so he told Ted Hudson to run to the stern and let him know if he could see anything; for although the wind was still high, and the sea was heaving, the water itself was fairly clear: it was a chance. Meanwhile, Vickery quickly stepped out onto the platform on the starboard side of the bridge from which vantage he could see the stern beyond the single cargo hold.

Then, in a delayed reaction from the moment of impact, and before Hudson could reach a good observation point, the top half of a barnacled and weed-strewn ship's mast rose above the waves slowly and regally tracing a semicircular rise and fall, to slip beneath the waves on the other side, closely followed by an underwater turbulence that rose to the surface in a series of large bubbles brought about by the shifting of some very heavy body. The Captain and Ted Hudson were not alone in seeing this sight, for with the grinding of metal under *The Viking's* stern, several of the crew, including Jakes and Blythe had crowded the companionways to get on deck – mainly from shock and curiosity but also in case they were needed.

Every ship's Captain must be prepared for the unexpected. Vickery knew they had struck an uncharted wreck, and that in doing so his ship had caught the sunken vessel as it lay tilted on the seabed, so that the impact and weight of *The Viking* had dragged it

upright and then over. He saw by the encrusted state of the mast, and the ease by which it had been turned, that it had sunk at that spot less than six months before. His charts had been up to date when they had left Liverpool in July; but a nautical cartographer had either slipped up by not mapping this sunken vessel or, and more likely, it had not been reported before *The Viking* had sailed. He wondered just what tragic events had brought about the death of this vessel, and whether those on board had drowned or got away in lifeboats. Cape Vírgenes was the eastern point closest to the Straits, which marked the graveyard of many sunken wrecks in this hazardous part of the world; not all were charted, for some had been truly lost and quietly forgotten; but for all the strong current-driven sand burred their edges and humped them in its dull yellowed blanket.

While Vickery's mind was flitting through these sudden events, he had been conscious of an uneven vibration through the deck. At that moment the tannoy bell rang insistently, and he picked up the waterproofed phone.

'Gordon here. Bad news, James! Engines all right, but the starboard propeller has been damaged by the impact. Must be quite bad by the degree of vibration. If I run that shaft at all the imbalance would soon crush its bearings, even twist the shaft itself. I'm sorry; this looks as if it's the end for *The Viking* – if not for ourselves,' he concluded lugubriously.

'Thanks, Gordon. I imagine you know that we hit a sunken wreck, and that our rudder is out of action; almost certainly twisted or jammed, or even lying on the seabed! I'll be getting a report in from the bo'sun on the internal linkages; I have to check it. As you say, with the starboard propeller out of service as well, we can't go on. I don't know what the bottom's like, but there's a shallow bay behind Cape Vírgenes; I shall try and beach *The Viking* there. No matter what damage is caused, I'm going to need both engines and propellers for at least as long as they last. We've given it a good try. Thanks for your support.'

Vickery felt old and tired as he hung up the tannoy. It had come so suddenly, even arching gracefully! For more than two days they had been fighting an intensely violent cyclonic storm; now with a final sweep of the pen, the fate of *The Viking* had just been written:

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an uncharted wreck lying on the seabed was to prove the death of their own ship. They were in one of the loneliest bays in the world, with no chance at all of getting to a dockyard for repairs. In any case, he thought, the owners would rather have it this way: out of sight, out of mind – and Lloyd's would pay!

There had been no reaction so far from any of his passengers, while the steadiness shown by the crew was due to their self-discipline and courage. Many of them had been with Vickery on several long trading voyages, and had come to hold him in high regard; some of the lonelier men even bordered on seeing him as their nautical father figure. He returned their warmth with his own unique loyalty and care, paying discreet attention to those more solitary souls.

Bill Jakes clambered up the steps to the bridge, just as Vickery was picking up the tannoy phone again, selecting the tiny radio shack. 'Eric –' he began, but there was no answer. He broadened the sweep of the tannoy to cover all working areas of the ship, and called again; this time Eric heard as he was leaving the engine room, and was able to acknowledge the Captain's call from the nearest tannoy extension. 'Eric, delay sending my messages to both Montevideo and Rio, or cancel them both if they've already gone; but let the one to our owners go out, along with a copy of the cancelled transmissions to Montevideo and Rio; add a note on my message to the owners that the attached messages have been cancelled. Now – and this is vital – add on to my message to the Blue Circle Shipping Line this small paragraph: "Since writing the above, *The Viking* struck a sunken wreck. Resultant damage is as follows: starboard propeller damaged and out of use. Rudder hopelessly jammed or broken off. A general Mayday signal will go out after this transmission is sent to yourselves. Our position is... (give this). If there is no practical response to our Mayday call within a reasonable time, I intend to beach *The Viking* at a suitable point in the long bay stretching north from Cape Virgenes." Did you get all that, word for word, Eric?'

'Yes, sir, I wrote it down exactly as you dictated it.'

'Good; then send it after you've checked our exact position in the map room. After which, put on automatic repeat every minute a general Mayday signal, along with our position. Bill has taken

over the bridge watch, so you can take a breather when you've done everything. Don't forget, copies of transmissions to me.'

'Aye, aye, sir; I'll get on to it right away,' replied Eric.

'He seems very cheerful, Bill. Youth! If I didn't know Eric better, I'd have thought he was enjoying himself. What a mess we're in – they'll pillory me for this!' Vickery said sadly.

'I think he likes a break from bridge duty,' Jakes replied. 'On the other matter you touched on. I fear you're probably right. Someone has to take the rap, and who is more open to it than the Captain? It's grossly unfair, and I'm truly sorry.'

'Thank you, Bill,' replied Vickery.

'By the way, sir, a message from our bo'sun: "There's nothing wrong with the internal steering gear." He thinks that the rudder has broken free of the ship,' Jakes added.

'Right, but I had to have it checked. Anyway, taking it that you know the whole situation, I want the crew to be told our final plans, from which I hope there'll be no lives lost. Close to us is Cape Virgenes. To its north you can see a long, slightly recessed bay; it's far from ideal, and it won't give us much shelter from the strong winds and heavy seas, but with a damaged propeller and no steering, our only option is to anchor there and wait, or beach *The Viking* where we can. Charts show barely covered rocky outcrops here and there, although I doubt their accuracy on placement; in any case, we'll have very little directional choice in the matter.

'Go below now, Bill; see everyone and check they all know what to expect and what to do, especially the passengers. Life jackets with them, and they're to put them on up on deck when I give the signal from the bridge. I'll speak to everyone over the tannoy while you're below. We've only got the starboard lifeboat left; that and the much smaller Captain's gig at the stern. One change only: the two lifeboats were for the crew; Eric was to take the port side and yourself the starboard. Intuition tells that I'm going to need you on the gig, so kindly tell Eric to take over the starboard boat.'

Vickery paused a moment, smiled gently, and put his hand on Jake's shoulder. 'Our last voyage together, Bill.'

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Vickery lifted the tannoy and spoke to everyone on the ship, engine room, passengers and crew together, and briefly clarified the situation, for everyone had felt the crunch, and heard the screech of tortured metal as the ship's stern had dragged over the uncharted wreck below; indeed, some of those on duty on deck had seen for themselves the slow parabolic swing of the sunken ship's mast; likened to a dead man's arm, but with a final and magnificent gesture from its watery grave; barnacled and weed-bestrewn as it was, none had seen its like before, and they stood in silence as it rose from the eastern sea, to slide forever beneath the waves to the west. Vickery felt it was his duty to cover even what some of the crew already knew, if for no other reason than it gave the men a sense of security from their Captain's calmness and poise.

He then adjusted the tannoy to the engine room. 'Gordon, you heard my short talk to the crew and passengers. At present, this is for your hearing only: the land ahead, the bay, the beaches all seem to the eye to be reasonably clear; but I feel that appearances are deceptive: a sort of maritime mirage, illusions and unexpected snags lie ahead of us. I can't explain it better, and a landlubber would laugh me to scorn. For this reason more than any other we might have to abandon ship very fast; if this should be the case all of you must get on deck with the minimum of delay when you hear the call to abandon ship; no hanging on until the last minute from you and your chaps down there; you've got too far to climb to be able to get out quickly. I must repeat – and I know this will grate on you – I have to use the damaged propeller. Crude as it is, we can only steer by changing speeds on the two engines. Due to the land formation ahead, along with distorting colorations in the air, it's difficult to assess distances with any accuracy. I'd say we're between three to four miles from the

nearest beach. I hope we shall meet again on the beach. We wouldn't have got this far without you and your lads. Thank you.'

For a moment Commander Mactavish was uncharacteristically lost for words. 'Nothing to thank us for, Jim; but much appreciated just the same. I understand what you say, although tucked down below, it's not an experience I've ever had. Anyway, don't worry about us evacuating when the time comes, we'll be up there quick enough when you give the word! I'll be seeing you on one of those beaches, be sure of that.'

Vickery looked at the helm, turning uselessly with an hypnotic swing from the push and draw of the waves on the sternpost – right to left, left to right. Funny, he thought, we've no steerage way! It seems ages since we struck the wreck... He felt desperately tired, a cold chill eating into his bones as his mind wandered at random, his thoughts scattered hither and thither like particles of wind-blown dust. I'm just old and worn out; or is it that I'm afraid to take that final decision to beach the ship in the bay? I've been Captain of *The Viking* for over ten years now! So ran on his thoughts in his shocked and weary state of mind, fearful at the possible loss of lives, for which he felt a heavy burden of responsibility, for both his crew and the passengers.

But Vickery had always been a man of courage and decision, and these qualities rose up as he angrily thrust aside such weakening thoughts. With wind and wave, the ship was drifting nearer to the Cape, but fortunately the bows had not swung more than ten degrees from their northerly setting. He must keep more sea room between the ship and the craggy rock face of the headland. He pressed the tannoy selector for the engine room and called, 'Starboard engine slow ahead!'

The Viking vibrated uncomfortably under the uneven thrash of the propeller blades, but began to move forwards, turning slowly to the west and the bay. Vickery knew that he should see his few passengers, who were the most vulnerable people on board; but while he was so occupied in controlling the ship's course, he had no time to go below. However, a few minutes later Eric arrived on the bridge to confirm that their Mayday signals were being sent out once every minute; that he had cancelled the transmissions to both Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro, but there

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had been no reply from the Blue Circle Shipping Line. He handed copies of the radio transcripts to Vickery.

'Just the man! I was hoping that either Bill or yourself would turn up. Leave the radio transmissions for a while; I need you to take over this watch while I go and see the passengers. When I get back I want you to try again to reach the owners; repeat my first message, and press for a reply from them. Not that there's much they can do, but their lack of response is very odd. I'm curious to see if, and how, they'll react!'

Vickery abruptly changed tack. 'As you can see, and feel through the deck, we're turning towards the bay at slow speed on our starboard engine. Very soon we'll have to bring in the port engine to straighten her up. Head for the centre of that black cliff in the bay; it's nearest and appears to have a good stretch of beach at its foot. This'll be a new experience for you, Eric; steering a ship to a given point with no rudder, and the blade on one propeller bent or broken! I suggest you bring in the port engine now; keep the starboard engine to slow or dead slow. We must nurse *The Viking* along to her last resting place.'

'Don't worry, sir, I'll treat her like a crippled whale,' replied Eric, taking the cover off the tannoy system. Vickery nodded, and left the bridge. He knew he had sounded too concerned, and that he had over-reacted when he had spoken to Eric while handing over the bridge watch, for Eric had an inborn sense for the sea and ships.

On his way to the passenger lounge, Vickery met with the bo'sun and a young crewman, Fred Dawlish, heading towards the bridge bearing cutting equipment and various heavy tools. 'Sorry to trouble you, bo'sun. No time to strengthen the bridge housing now. Keep your eyes on the crew, and make sure they are ready to abandon ship when I give the word; some may be a bit jumpy. Did Mr Jakes tell you that Mr Blythe and yourself are to take over the starboard lifeboat?'

'Aye, sir, he did that; and I'll see that everyone's in order, along with whatever needs attention. But the bridge housing, sir? It's very unstable...'

'Right now other things are more important, bo'sun; but thanks.'

Once again the passenger lounge was empty, so Vickery went

round the three occupied cabins, asking them all to make their way to the lounge, as he had a few things to say, and there may not be another chance.

They were silent as they walked the short distance, then waited expectantly. Ruth stood between Curtis's knees, aware but trusting; this may have been the first time in her young life she had known any affection and security. Pietro was leaning lightly on the arm of his chair, and when Vickery caught his eye he could not help but be struck by his natural calm and peace, and even the power that radiated from him – towards Vickery alone!

This was not the first time that he had been taken aback by this unusual child. This unique boy, he thought; and once again his fears and worries drained away. Who is he? But there was no completely satisfactory answer in his mind.

He looked over his five remaining passengers; Maitland was cool and calm as usual; Curtis was a little tense, due no doubt to the two children who were in his special care. Father Paulos was an exception; he knew the sort of man well – zealous to the point of fanaticism; nerves strung as taut as a violin string; no lack of courage, but he could act irrationally and disrupt others, so must be watched.

He spoke slowly and firmly. 'I imagine you've all picked up the gist of what has happened, but you may have had slightly mixed versions from the crew, so let me briefly put you in the picture.' This he then did, hiding nothing, but avoiding any unnecessary nautical details, also the peculiarities in the air that were distorting their vision of the land ahead. The Captain coughed deeply in his chest; he sounded tired, which had not been apparent when he had spoken to them before.

He went on, 'You'll appreciate that with no steering, and one propeller bent or broken, we have no choice but to beach the ship somewhere in the long bay. We have to take it very slowly, because if the vibration from the badly damaged propeller breaks up the shaft bearings and seals, then we'll not be able to use it any more for several fairly obvious reasons. Pray that it'll last out long enough. It's hard enough to steer on two propellers, but on one...!' He shrugged slightly and let the unspoken words hang in the air.

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‘Anyway, a few points. Feel free to go on deck. The wind has eased; the sea slightly, but it’s still heavy, so take great care: I don’t want to lose any of you over the side. Be sure to have your life jacket with you, and if on deck you must wear it. The sea here is quite cold. Finally, assemble at the stern when we abandon ship; bring blankets and whatever warm clothing you have; you’ll be taken off in the Captain’s gig, along with Mr Jakes and myself. Be sure that I and my crew will do all we can to beach *The Viking* safely in one piece; but the sea can be tricky, so take nothing for granted. May God be with us all.’

Vickery was more deeply touched than he cared to admit. The sight of those passengers, more helpless than they knew, relying on him to get them off safely. Then those two children: Ruth so young and innocent, so weak, so utterly dependent; and Pietro... he did not quite know what to think, but deep in his mind he felt that in this boy lay destiny – the destinies of them all, perhaps. Even so, he was glad he had not told them about the curious tricks of light and shade that deceived his eyes, of land and haze, of rocks which came and went; a strange quirk of nature, for he knew well enough that his sight was still good, and that he could not be deceived unless there was some outside force at work.

Vickery hastened back to the bridge, emotionally turbulent, angrily brushing aside the tears that were unwittingly stinging his eyes. Although he would never admit as much, he was a deeply sensitive and compassionate man. The sea had called him when he was young, and he had learned to hide any such weaknesses in his nature, or so he thought. But along with the disasters and his growing weariness, these last few days had torn away much of the gossamer shroud behind which lived the real James Vickery. Pietro had known! Yes, he had known. Yet as he climbed the steps to the bridge, he felt this startling truth ease the burdens that were weighing him down. Somebody who really mattered knew him! Somebody who was nobody on this Earth. Strange thoughts indeed, but he made no attempt to brush them aside.

Eric had turned the ship, and at a little above dead slow they were thumping along unevenly, winding their way towards that part of the bay Vickery had earlier pointed out. The wind was gusting; but broken up by the Cape headland it was no more than

a diversionary hazard. However, the following waves were still very heavy, and this made keeping on course extremely difficult. Even with a ship in perfect order, no seaman ever liked to run before the sea.

Such was Eric's total concentration, that he had not noticed the Captain standing to his right and behind him. With the heavy thudding resonating through the deck, Vickery could feel the pain in the starboard propeller as it jarred heavily along the shaft and bearings. Even so, this was a touch too slow to maintain control of the ship: coming at an angle, any of the huge waves could throw their stern askew, turning the ship broadside on, which in their underpowered state could overturn them.

'Eric –' Vickery raised his voice over the gusting wind, to break into Eric's concentration – 'you'll have to increase revolutions a little. It's a fine job you're doing, but at this speed the risks are too great in a following sea of this size.'

Eric stiffened in fleeting surprise; he was not easily caught unawares. 'You're right, sir; I was thinking the same myself, but I didn't want to countermand your order.'

'Well, you can do so now. Ring down to the engine room and push our revs up a couple of notches. We have little choice. I'm not a marine engineer, but after many years at sea I've picked up some useful tips; one is that in cases of imbalance in revolving parts, there is an optimum speed at which the strain is minimised; in this case it would probably ease the strain on the starboard propeller and shaft by increasing our speed a trifle. I believe this to be the case here. See how the chief reacts; but regardless of his valuable and experienced opinion, we have no choice but to increase our revs.'

Eric was young enough to be impressed: from time to time Vickery had come up with knowledge, technical or otherwise, which his observant nature had picked up and thought about during his many years at sea. Turning to the simple array of instruments before him, he reached for the tannoy phone, selected the engine room connection, and rang down the order. There was no quibbling from Gordon Mactavish; indeed, he grunted back, 'That should extend its life a bit longer.'

And so it did; for as *The Viking* picked up that extra knot or so,

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keeping her on course became a little easier. Vickery missed nothing of this interplay, but he felt cautiously relieved as the heavy unbalanced vibrations through the deck eased a little. His eyes scanned the bay as far as he could see, but the same atmospheric peculiarity prevailed; while his eyes told him one thing, he felt that much of what he looked at was a visual distortion, a subtle warp of light and shade, of form and distance. He noticed that Eric was also peering ahead with difficulty, hence no doubt his extreme concentration. While not wishing to admit to any weakness in his sight, an invaluable asset to sailors, on the spur of the moment Vickery decided to ask Eric if he saw ahead quite clearly.

Eric paused a moment before replying, 'Frankly, sir, I find it difficult and odd. I'm not sure I can explain just how, but there are distortions that come and go – or maybe just change into other forms of distortions. It's the most uncomfortable feeling I've ever had at sea. My eyes are perfect, yet I cannot see things as they really are; so much so – and this will sound crazy to you, sir – that I hardly feel as if *The Viking* is under my control! Perhaps Bill—?'

But Vickery cut him off. 'No, there's nothing wrong with your sight, nor with mine; I feel just as uncomfortable with it.'

Eric was visibly shaken by these phenomena, never having seen their like before: distances that in one moment were apparently clear, yet when one looked again, were hazy and immeasurable; illusions that were, and then were not; jagged rocky outcrops that subtly changed in form and position.

'Listen Eric, it's quite natural that these phenomena should shake your reason and unravel your judgment. I came on this once before during my life at sea, and I've heard tales of similar occurrences in various parts of the world; for instance, the China Seas, the Caribbean, even up the coast off Florida. I've read quite a bit about it, and there have been various theories put forward, as one would expect; but nobody can bring conclusive evidence as to how and why they occur. Even recorded illusions are discouraged, and not many still living would testify to similar experiences. In the majority of cases they're more frequent in partially enclosed areas, large or small, such as we are in now.

'If I was to try and relate the most likely theories, we'd be here

all night, but we have a ship to steer and to beach. But here, very briefly, is the prevailing theory. Such rare phenomena can in some way be linked to a rift in time, which can pass as easily and swiftly as it occurs. This could bring about an entanglement of dimensional states. There are several theoretical causes; I think the most likely is that there can be wide differences between magnetic waves through land and sea, which could disrupt the dimension of time linked to speed. Still, a mystery perhaps; yet as nothing occurs by accident, I think it likely that dimensional states are in some way involved.

'Anyway, Eric,' Vickery concluded, 'we can't bring it back to what we recognise as normality. As we near the shore it may correct itself. Meanwhile we must have two men on the bridge, the second to act as a visual support to the duty officer. In a situation like this it's not wise to rely on any one man's accuracy of sight: alone, an illusion can very easily become a fixed delusion, whereas a back-up to the bridge officer would form a better balance. I'll remain here until *The Viking* has been successfully beached. I believe Bill is due on watch in about thirty minutes, which will give you time enough to extract a radio response, if forthcoming, from our owners.'

While Eric was both controlling the course of the ship and listening intently to Vickery's words, he felt a divided man; his active self as a skilled and highly respected ship's officer; his passive self back as a dependent child again, reliant on his father's strength and knowledge against the unknown, against dark and unseen dangers. At the same time there rose up in him a tremendous warmth of feeling, of gratitude towards this Captain of his who, while he had been speaking, had magically eased away his doubts and fears. It was not from Vickery's knowledge and reasoning, for Eric was rightly certain that Vickery knew a great deal more than he had said; it was the man himself: quiet in his manner, courteous at all times to his subordinates, yet he towered over them all. Without exception his crew respected him, and with few exceptions even loved him, although many never knew it.

These hidden feelings and thoughts sped through Eric's mind as he turned briefly to answer Vickery. 'Thank you for explaining

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these matters to me, sir. I don't know what to say, except I'll manage as always. You can rely on me.'

'I never doubted it, Eric; yet we are but mortal, and it is well to remember that; which is why I want two of us on the bridge, at least while these illusions persist.'

There followed an harmonious silence between the Captain and his junior bridge officer. No more was spoken on the matter, with its very obvious difficulties. Eric handled the course of the ship with an admirable economy of changes in revolutions; but the eerie illusions persisted, confusing distances, beaches and obstructions. It became increasingly apparent that their greatest danger lay in occasional rocky outcrops, some bulging from the land itself, others rising from the seabed; there in one moment, then hazing and disappearing the next, but indicating the presence of unseen hazards, for there can be no spectre without some unseen substance.

For a while Vickery said nothing. He saw the strain on Eric's nerves as he strove to keep the ship on course; but the beach towards which *The Viking* was heading shifted position, to the north, then to the south, or blurred until for a while it was indistinct from other nearby beaches. It was a hit-and-miss game, and in such a game it would be better to have more sea room, even in the long bay. Besides, thought Vickery, it's possible that the Cape Virgenes promontory was itself a magnetic focal point, causing disruption and creating distortions. His deeply thoughtful nature and long experience of the sea, the world, and life more broadly, had taught him to sift finely, but never to deny the scientifically impossible, whether understood or not.

'Eric, let me take over now. I want you go below to the radio shack and contact the owners again. Give them a quick résumé of our accident from the wreck, our current problems, but simplified; ask for a reply, and sign it as from myself. I doubt they'll be able to accept a word of the phenomena we're experiencing, but let's have it on record just the same. Afterwards, put us back onto the one-minute Mayday call with our position; but leave it so that the owners can reply if they wish. Then send Bill up here; he's about due anyway. I mean to stand further out into the bay. I have a hunch that this Cape promontory may be

promoting the illusions. Finally, grab some rest, Eric; you need it.'

Vickery turned to the tannoy phone, adjusted it to the engine room, and gave Gordon Mactavish the necessary instruction to swing *The Viking* twenty degrees north. Having found the new course, he determined to hold it for thirty minutes or so before turning back towards the cliff and beach he had chosen. The ship twisted vilely as the sea now angled in on their starboard beam; not dangerously so, for both waves and currents had eased slightly as they moved slowly away from the promontory. The illusions were weakening too, less fuzzy and indistinct, and a little less frequent.

Ten minutes passed, and Bill Jakes arrived on the bridge, rolling his way across to where Vickery was standing by the binnacle. 'Reporting for watch duty, sir. What is all this I hear about illusions from Eric? He looked slightly stunned.'

'Look towards the shore; see for yourself,' replied Vickery. 'They've lessened slightly, they were worse before; Eric had a hard time of it alone on the bridge before I got back.'

Jakes looked and accepted what he had never seen before. He was much older than his friend and compatriot, Eric Blythe; but while he was the first to praise Eric's inborn seamanship above his own, Bill Jakes was steadier and more experienced; also he had been with Vickery far longer, and had extended his own seamanship and knowledge from this relationship. At length he turned to a tired but whimsically smiling Vickery.

'Do you know the how and why of these, James?' In the course of duty Jakes would never normally have used Vickery's Christian name, especially on the bridge, but he was deeply puzzled. Vickery explained as far as he had gone with Eric, and why he had decided to take a NNE course up the bay. That much and no more, for there was no point in going further into what was scientifically theoretical knowledge, knowledge that he had picked up from years of scattered research.

'Thirty minutes have passed,' said Vickery. 'We must turn in towards the shoreline.'

'Ahead, about three miles off, is the place you earmarked for beaching the ship. No, dammit, it's moved! Now it's a damn great rock sticking out of the water; only that, too, is shifting, but not so

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much, but wavering as though it might not be there at all!' exclaimed a frustrated Jakes.

'Hold it, Bill!' Vickery cut in. 'The illusions are easier to read than they were when we were nearer the Cape promontory. It's now possible to get an approximate mean between the different positions on which you see that beach. Outcrops of rock are more deceptive, probably because they're smaller than a whole cliff and beach; at present we can't calculate their presence and position with much accuracy. I don't like the responsibility with people's lives, but we've no choices.

'I spoke to the chief a short while back, and he confirmed what I can feel through the deck, that our starboard screw may have broken up still further. But even if it hasn't, the shaft bearings are smoking, burning out under the strain; Gordon has put one man onto it with a hose and cold sea water to cool the main bearings. We've no time for manoeuvre. Circumstances are forcing our hand. We must go for the shore before our starboard source of power is lost, which would leave us no other option but to abandon ship, and very quickly before she swings broadside to the sea and overturns; in fact I'm not sure that we should not anticipate that state. What do you think?'

Jakes' reply was almost immediate. 'The sea is still very high; I'd stick with the ship for as long as possible.'

'I thought you'd say that,' replied Vickery. 'I agree, even with these difficult to place rocky outcrops, let alone what we can't see below the surface. On the other hand, we've only one lifeboat left, motorised and virtually unsinkable; but with this heavy following sea and strong currents I can foresee very considerable difficulties in holding and loading the lifeboat. It's only a short distance to the shore; along with our two life rafts there's enough room to carry the whole crew, but I don't like it; I'd rather have turned the ship to port and dropped anchors, so *The Viking's* bulk would act as a shield, however temporary. I want you to get the bo'sun with a couple of men and see that our remaining lifeboat is slung out on its davits; then check with him that the crew have been sorted between the lifeboat and the rafts. You'll hear what I have to say over the tannoy, so there's no point in me running through our programme with you now. Time is critical!'

Jakes left the bridge, and Vickery crackled into action with remarkable alacrity for a man of his years. First he gave an order to the chief to adjust engine revolutions to bring the ship's bows slowly round to head towards the cliff-sheltered beach. He then turned the adjusting knob to the tannoy to reach all parts of the ship, including the passengers.

'Now hear this,' crackled his voice, made slightly metallic by its course through microphone and covered wires, yet imperative and commanding to grip the attention of all. '*The Viking* can only limp along. We're turning towards the shore where I hope to beach her. However, we are plagued by certain visual illusions, which you may already have noticed, so you must be prepared for the unexpected. I want all on board to be ready to abandon ship at a moment's notice from me. The passengers will assemble with life jackets and blankets by the Captain's gig at the stern. The crew already know their lifeboat drill. One change: our starboard lifeboat is to be under Mr Blythe; Mr Jakes will take the gig. The bo'sun will see to it that the lifeboat is swung out on its davits to deck level, ready to be dropped into the sea without delay.'

Vickery paused a moment. 'It only remains for me to say how sorry I am that after such a magnificent struggle against the storm, we should now find ourselves virtually helpless; but as you know, the sea can produce the unexpected and the unwanted. A Mayday signal, with our position, has been on automatic transmission every minute since we struck the wreck. Each of you is known personally to me; you are individuals, not just faces linked to names, and your welfare and safety are far more important to me than my own. Over the voyages, in many cases years, we have travelled together we have become a finely tuned team, a seafaring family. Take care of yourselves and each other. God willing, we'll meet again on the beach ahead of us.'

The tannoy was turned off as Vickery's voice died away. For a while his presence hung in the air, and apart from the gusts of wind, the heave and creak of the ship from the powerful lift and sickening fall of the great waves, no word was spoken. His voice had permeated deeply into the hearts of his crew, along with a calmness and an uplifting air beside which no thought of selfishness or panic could live in comfort.

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As the ship neared the shore, Vickery noticed that the taunting illusions were lessening; at least this was so as he looked towards the beach backed by a short, steep cliff. But he was wary, for nearer at hand more massive objects became less prone to optical distortion, which was not the case with the smaller rocky outcrops; these were still blurred, and came and went, sometimes in one place, then in another, or not at all. There was nothing to be gained by trying to avoid them, even if that were possible in a heavy following sea, and with their very clumsy steering abilities.

The beach was now barely two miles ahead; the ship holding its course in spite of the huge rollers and a curving north-to-south current, being the waning power from the cyclonic storm. Vickery picked up the tannoy phone and adjusted it to reach the engine room. Mactavish must have been standing ready, for he responded almost immediately to the Captain's call. 'We're nearing the coast, but coming in too fast: reduce revolutions by a quarter. After which I need only two men below; the rest to get up on deck. Tell them to wait by the lifeboat, or by one of the rafts.'

The ship slowed slightly, but held its course. Vickery looked forward, waiting; he knew the chief too well to have many doubts as to his intentions. In slightly less than four minutes, five of his assistant engineers appeared on deck; but there was no sign of Donald McWhirter, nor of the chief. Vickery sighed, and picked up the tannoy again. 'Gordon, I don't want you and Donald staying down there any longer than you have to. When I give the word to abandon ship, shut the engines down and get up here fast!'

But before Vickery had put down the tannoy phone, Commander Mactavish's voice cut in. 'James, you know I can't leave my post while we're still at sea, and while there's a chance of any changes being called for.'

'I do need you and Donald there, Gordon; there's no argument with the seamen's manual. But will you promise that when I give the call to abandon ship, you'll cut your engines pronto, and both get on deck without delay? Be prepared to break your record! I've already spoken to the crew, as you must have heard. Just in case I don't make it, I want to add that what I said applies to you as both a friend and compatriot. I'll be in contact again.'

The chief's voice came on again. 'Thank you, James. Don't

worry about me. I can get up on deck within three minutes, less if I'm in a real hurry, and it seems I will be!' He chuckled.

Vickery could not see more than a corner of his gig as it hung over the stern, nor could he see if the passengers were assembled in the lee of an overhang forward of the boat. He used the tannoy again. 'Mr Jakes, I can't see, and you can't reply; but I hope the passengers are waiting near my gig. They're in your care.'

In fact Father Paulos had had an accident, and all had been apparent chaos in the passengers' area: in the heavily pitching ship, he had slipped and struck his head sharply on a bulkhead; half stunned, with blood seeping down his left cheek, he was leaning against the door to his cabin, eyes slightly glazed, arms hanging slackly by his sides. Curtis, with Pietro and Ruth, found him as they were on their way to get their life jackets from Henry's cabin.

Grasping the situation in a moment, Henry let go of Ruth's hand, pointed briefly to his cabin and said crisply to Pietro, 'Go and get ours; I'll see to Paulos.'

Then to Paulos, 'Where's your life jacket?' he asked curtly, roughly shaking the Spanish priest to bring him to his senses. 'Is it in your cabin?'

Paulos nodded bemusedly, inclining his head slightly. Letting go of him, Henry hurried into Paulos's cabin, grabbed the life jacket lying in readiness on his bunk, and got back just as Pietro appeared with their own three jackets slung over his shoulder.

'Hang mine on the door and put your life jackets on.'

The shock of being shaken and spoken to so roughly and urgently, helped to pull the Spaniard to his senses, and without difficulty he was tied into his own life jacket, followed by Henry into his. With very little aid, Paulos soon recovered his strength, for although of slender build, appearances were deceptive in that he was wiry and tougher than most would generally think. They picked up four blankets and made for the companionway and to their boat station at *The Viking's* stern; there they found Maitland and an anxious-looking Jakes, who was on the verge of going back to look for them. Nowhere was there any sign of panic or undue haste, which said much for the quality of the officers and crew under Captain Vickery.

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Vickery called down for small engine adjustments, so *The Viking* managed a fairly steady course to the beach ahead, while the starboard propeller and shaft were vibrating agonisingly through the deck. Ten minutes passed, then twenty, and they were now within a mile of the beach towards which they were heading. Both crew and passengers waited and watched as they drew slowly nearer to the shore. There was little or no illusory wavering at this close range, and Vickery allowed himself a shadow of hope that they would be able to beach the ship smoothly, her bows cutting firmly into the sand and shingle.

Suddenly there was a sharp call from Archie Wayland, on lookout duty halfway up the forrard mast, 'The seventh wave, sir! The seventh wave!' He was pointing unmistakably beyond the stern where the great waves were rolling in. Vickery swung himself round the side of the bridge to see more clearly for himself. Then he saw! Five or six waves back there followed a monstrous wave, a 100-foot mountain of water that could engulf *The Viking*, particularly at their slower speed.

Vickery leaped at the tannoy phone, open to all: 'Gordon, full speed ahead on both engines, and damn the damage! Passengers and crew – get a firm hold of a stanchion, both hands, and don't let go under any circumstances; you're likely to get a bath before we beach the ship! Mr Jakes, I don't have to tell you to help Curtis with the two children. Sharp now, everyone, there's no time to lose!'

He kept a hold of the tannoy phone, and threw an arm around the binnacle in front of him. Vickery had no illusions as to the power and striking force of such a wave, especially as it had been driven higher over a gradually shelving seabed. There was no time to spare, but just long enough for the engines and propellers to be able to increase speed by a knot or so. The starboard propeller and shaft bearings would soon shatter under the strain, but at least they would have served their final purpose.

Those on deck, particularly the passengers at the stern, could now see the towering wave, climbing even higher as it rolled over the rising seabed. Jakes had acted swiftly, and had lined his five passengers to face the ship's rounded bulkhead, against which was fixed a steel rail; at one end was Jim Maitland, then Father Paulos,

next Jakes with Ruth held tightly in front of his body, while at the other end was Henry Curtis with Pietro's body clamped firmly between himself and the bulkhead.

On the bridge Vickery waited. He knew the incredible weight and destructive power in such a freak combination of wave, wind and currents, and that such a blow was almost upon them. He was a true master of the sea, one of the best, but in their crippled state there was nothing more he could do.

All on board held their breaths, as in a giant lift *The Viking* was drawn higher and higher, at the same time spilling forward before the sweep of the curling wave. Moments later, as the wave's root was lifted by the shelving seabed, tons of water curled over, turned and thundered down onto the ship in a great deluge, striking the deck forrard, smashing in the repaired cargo hatch, and for an immeasurable time burying all but the ship's stern under metres of roiling, turbulent sea. *The Viking* staggered, turned and pitched heavily to port as she slid back into the deep trough, dropped into the wake of the retreating wave, down and down. Vickery's heart sank as he watched the inclinometer needle at thirty degrees, forty, then slowly to nearly forty-five degrees; beyond the ship's normal limit. Again he blessed the weight of well-stacked pig iron stacked low in the holds; without this stabilising weight the ship would surely have rolled over and sunk. Even so it was touch and go, and for a breathless moment *The Viking* hung on grimly, shuddering under the terrible burden, her structural stresses screaming. In fact, like Neptune from the waves, she did not turn, but swung back slowly; her forrard hold filled; the cargo sodden; the ship heavy with sea water.

Seconds later all aboard became conscious of a grinding and rumbling sound that travelled through the hull: the cargo in the forrard hold was on the move, smashing and crunching its way through the beams as if they were matchwood; this in spite of careful loading, and the placing of specially fitted battens to hold it from shifting in rough seas.

Meanwhile, amid a crumple of bent girders, shattered glass and collapsed walls, Vickery lay, holding the tannoy receiver, but barely conscious, pinned to the decking by the wreckage of his own bridge housing.

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Curiously, the port side of the ship had suffered most under the vast weight of the crumbling wave, and two of the crew had been swept overboard in the water-borne avalanche, their screams ripped away in the wind and crashing sea.

Peter Cringle, while still hanging on, had been neatly pinned to the deck, impaled through his foot by a quivering yard-long sliver of steel. Then, hurled by the force of the sea, uncaring of rank, a heavy object struck George Bowen, the bo'sun's mate, literally ripping away his left arm. Marcus Law grabbed him and managed to hold on until the main drag of the subsiding water had lessened; but when he saw the frightful wound and spouting blood, he let the unconscious body go, to be swept away in the wash of receding water.

On the starboard side, only Fred Dawlish lost his life, and that due to panic. The great wall of green sea that had risen directly over their heads had been too much for him. With a piercing scream he had run out from a recess flanking the Captain's and officers' cabins below the bridge. Exposed, he was caught by the surge of ungovernable water, and swept over the rails and out to sea before anyone could even call out to him.

In the stern, Jakes and the passengers had some shelter from the main mass of falling water, and so escaped unhurt with only a drenching. But for a few of the crew it was different, for no matter how firm their grips on the nearest railing, the torrential weight of the cascading sheet of water had caught two of the less experienced men by surprise, Harry Shaw and Louis Romero, tearing them from their grips, and sweeping them like puppets over the rails into the boiling sea. Without life jackets, some survived and swam towards the land, but were carried to the south until, weakened by the cold, a few had eventually crawled on to a bleak and giant crab-ridden shore. Whether any survived and made it inland for help remains unknown.

Jakes looked at the Captain's gig, which was in itself undamaged but hanging askew on one of its davits. In a moment Maitland was by his side, and together they struggled to wind down the side that had jammed, but with no effect: the boat had been lifted by the wave, and the loosened cable had become hopelessly entangled in the cogs of the winding mechanism.

Without a heavy cutting instrument there was nothing they could do; the boat hung there, inviting, but useless. In the aftermath of the vast wave, and the terrible damage done to the ship, Jakes knew it would be hopeless to get anyone along with the right tools.

Jakes turned to the passengers, but before he could say anything Curtis broke in. 'Under the circumstances I think we'll have a better chance if we swim for it! We've all got our life jackets, and the beach is not so far. Do you both agree?' he asked, turning to Maitland and Father Paulos.

They both nodded, glad that Curtis had taken the initiative.

'Right then, no time to waste. Jim, will you take Ruth? She's the lightest; tie her life jacket strap to yours. I'll take Pietro. Paulos, you'll be on your own, but be ready to help either of us if we're in trouble. We'll make it,' he said with conviction.

Curtis then turned to Jakes. 'It's better this way. Thank you for doing your best for us, but as the senior deck officer your Captain and crew need you more than we do. I hope their lifeboat wasn't damaged or swept away. God be with you.'

'It's unlikely that our remaining lifeboat has been either damaged or lost; it was double lashed after we lost the port-side boat,' replied Jakes, who was struck by Curtis's cool authority and logic, which he knew to be right; at the same time he was relieved to be free of further responsibility for them. Pietro's and Ruth's straps were tied firmly to Curtis and Maitland; Jakes watched as they climbed the low railing and, without hesitation, leaped into the heaving sea, as far from the pitching stern of the ship as they could, and began their slow swim towards the shore. Curtis had also been right; under these quickly changing circumstances, Vickery and the ship must have first call on him. With a brief sigh of intuitive foreboding, Jakes turned and made his way forrard, back into the body of the ship.

Like the wild ride of the Valkyries, death rode with the old vessel as it gathered pace on the crests, driven on by the weak thrust of her propellers; while in the pit, and on the surge of every wave, her bows drove ever deeper, the fore holds weighted and sodden, over-burdened under successive hills of crashing seas. In her death throes *The Viking* rose sluggishly under the intolerable

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weight of water that threatened to crush her down to the shelving seabed.

Jakes was conscious of Vickery's voice on the tannoy as he called to every part of the vessel to, 'Abandon ship!' His call was repeated again and again; yet something was not right; his voice sounded unnatural; it lacked his usual firm note, fading slightly as each call was repeated. Then the tannoy fell silent; and even above the wail and crash from gale and wave, from *The Viking's* screaming distress, and from the faint wind-blown cries of the crew, Jakes felt only a dead silence in his heart. As he hurried forrard, he reasoned that voices were always distorted in transit through electrified wires and speakers; but nothing could dispel his doubts and fears.

Under Eric and the bo'sun, Jakes watched impatiently as their remaining lifeboat filled with all the men who had not been killed or swept overboard. With a sharp scream from the chocks, the boat was released, dropping heavily into the sea in a wide splay of water, which in turn was caught by the wind and whipped away in flattened tendrils of streaming silk, adding to the scene of wild and desolate beauty. Now except for Vickery and himself, and perhaps the chief and Donald McWhirter, *The Viking* had been cleared of her crew and passengers.

Minutes later the ship's bow and port side drove onto a sharp underwater rock: the impact jarred through the whole ship, sending Jakes reeling against a bulkhead as he was hastening to the bridge. *The Viking* ground on with dreadful slowness and a terrible ripping of steel plates, opening up much of the hull from bow to 'midships. The sea rushed in, and she would have sunk swiftly had her bulk not hung helplessly, gripped by the very rock that had mortally pierced her side.

Even in the noise of rushing water and the tortured shock of the hull's tearing plates, Jakes was aware that the tannoy was still conspicuous by its eerie silence. As he rounded the bulkhead, Jakes looked forrard and up, and felt an icy hand grip his heart. Where the bridge housing had been, there was now only a crushed tangle of twisted metal, light girders and stays. Save for the obvious signs of destruction, it was as though the bridge had never been. Only the brass binnacle still stood, upright and intact,

pointing like a grim finger of fate to the grey sky above. Silence, louder than all the wildness of nature, lay like a blanket over what had been the bridge, and the silence of Vickery's familiar voice.

Vickery lay close to the binnacle, his body trapped under the collapsed port-side housing of the bridge; the tannoy phone still gripped in his left hand. Around his loins was a slowly forming pool of dark blood, saturating the clothing about his midriff; his face was drawn and deathly pale. The sight sickened Jakes, hardened as he was to various, and often bloody, injuries at sea; while the shock, and his impotent frustration and grief, effectively blanked his mind from his own perilous situation. As he knelt by Vickery's side, he became aware of another person clambering up the bent and broken steps to the bridge; he looked up, unashamedly weeping, to see the familiar features of the chief engineer, Gordon Mactavish.

Jakes turned back to Vickery. 'You must go, Gordon; you have a fair chance if you're quick.'

'And what about you, Bill?'

'I must stay with him until he dies; but there's no point in you remaining... How long do you think he'll last?' added Jakes plaintively.

'You can do nothing here except uselessly throw away your own life as well,' Gordon replied.

Jakes reluctantly dragged his eyes away from Vickery, and looked straight at Gordon. 'You don't understand; he is my friend and my Captain. Do you really expect me to leave him at the last to die alone?' Jakes' speech was slow and flat, but it carried well enough his purpose and determination.

Dully, Jakes listened until the retreating sounds of Gordon's feet on the steel steps of the bridge had died away, swallowed in the slowly diminishing storm. He smelt burning oil in the air, but he did not move.

Seven: **The Lonely Man**

Bill Jakes was glad to have this time alone with Jim Vickery as he lay dying; even if his friend should never regain consciousness, yet in a singular way it was right, and gave him some comfort that at the last he would at least have Vickery to himself. Jake's thoughts whirled amidst a tangled array of past events, which faded and sank back as he looked down at the deathly pallor in the face of the man he knew so well, and had grown to love so much.

Occasional flames from the companionway below flickered dimly through the thickening smoke. Jakes knew that if the fuel oil did not explode and blow *The Viking* apart, then the toxic fumes and heat would anyway become intolerable. He took Jim Vickery's hand in his. Hard and worn, he thought, like his own. He felt tired in the slowly thickening smoke, mixed with a heavier stench of burning oil. Vickery had been his strongest link to life, especially in later years when youth had long since passed him by. There could surely be no better way to go than now with his friend's hand in his. So ran Bill Jakes' thoughts in that moment. Through the swirling haze he looked down again at Vickery, to be overjoyed by a pair of bright sea-blue eyes that caught his own, while a whimsical smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, like the final flaring of a guttering candle.

'You're awake!' Jakes' glad exclamation was jerked from him, but he choked in the smoke-laden air, and a brief fit of coughing cut off any further words on his part.

'Listen to me, my friend,' murmured Vickery, but so quietly that Jakes had to bend low to catch the words. 'There's not much time. We're on fire, aren't we?'

Jakes nodded glumly, then very briefly filled the Captain in with what had happened since the bridge housing had collapsed, and that the remaining crew and passengers had got away.

'Then you should have gone too...' There was a trace of

reprimand in his voice, although his eyes belied the words. 'But thank you for your friendship and loyalty, now and all the time we've been together. I remember everything; I shan't forget.'

Vickery's voice drifted hazily from weakness and loss of blood, so Jakes only just caught his last few words; but those words were life and breath to him, and his heart sang.

He waited patiently, for he felt that Vickery had something more he wished to say, and was hanging onto life, building up enough strength to speak. Jakes lay on the floor, where the air was less polluted amidst the tangle of wreckage that had been the bridge housing, his head not more than a few inches from Vickery's. A few moments later his friend's eyes fluttered, then struggled open with an obvious effort of will.

'I have seen things, Bill, wonderful things; I wish we could have seen them together.' Vickery battled with his speech, which was slow and halting. 'The boy, Pietro; I can't see it all; it's hidden from me, even though I'm dying. There's something about him, something special, something not of this Earth. I feel that Curtis may not live to care for him, the boy alone; but seek out both children; get them away from this trouble and danger; look after them. I know you, Bill; this boy will fill a great need in you. For my sake and yours, do this for me.'

In his overwhelming anxiety Vickery had managed to heave his poor, broken body onto one elbow, his hand trembling on Jake's sleeve, while his eyes blazed intensely with the last fires of his life. Jakes nodded several times, his speech stifled by his welling sorrow. But Vickery was satisfied; he had spent the last of his waning strength, and sank back exhausted.

Captain James Vickery never spoke again during the last few minutes of his life on Earth; but Jakes, who had again taken his hand in his own, felt a light squeeze, and thereby knew that he was relied on to do his best in this, Vickery's last request... Soon it was over: a long deep sigh, and his Captain, and truest of friends, lay quiet and still to this world.

His mind temporarily swept clear in his terrible loss, Jakes felt empty inside, emptier than he had ever felt before. Life held nothing for him now; he had no wish to leave Vickery's body and the bridge, which was now engulfed in thick smoke and hot

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fumes. He knew his attachment for James Vickery ran deep, but until now he had not fully realised just how much the Captain had blended into his own life; all that Jakes loved and needed now lay dead on the smouldering deck of his own bridge.

But then his friend's last words rang through his head – 'For my sake and yours, do this for me.' He did not fully comprehend this request; in his present stunned state of mind the whole thing was beyond him, and Jakes' mind was spinning. Yes, Pietro is a quiet and delightful boy, even exceptional; but to say there was 'something not of this Earth' about him was surely too much! An overwrought figment of his friend's imagination in his dying moments? On the other hand, Vickery was not a man given to wild statements, nor could he have been so in his last minutes; indeed his cool appraisal and far-seeing judgment in all matters had always been one of his outstanding qualities.

Jakes looked down on Vickery's face, now hard to discern in the increasingly thick and oily smoke that moved heavily in the air, but none the less deeply impressive in its mask of nobility and peace. The sight was enough to spur Jakes into action. However he felt about Pietro, whatever stray doubts he had held as to his friend's toppling balance of mind, the truth in what Vickery had thought had been pre-eminent, so his own vacillating ideas must be put aside. In all their time together Jakes had never knowingly let Vickery down, and he was not about to begin now. He knew he could never again face his friend if he had not done his best for him in this, his last request.

With a handkerchief over his mouth to filter out the worst of the fumes, Jakes rose unsteadily to his feet, paused briefly, and with a last look at Vickery's body lying pinned under a tangle of twisted metal, he hastened to the bridge's starboard exit – only to be thrown back by a wave of scorching fumes and burnt gases rising from the roaring inferno below, distorting the oil-fumed air into wavy striations of hazy, moving light. Now that Jakes had set his mind on a definite course of action, he saw that his only chance lay in making a rush for it; the distance to be covered from the bridge to the deck and sea was not great, and he knew *The Viking* like the palm of his hand. With luck and determination he should make it into the sea, and then for the long swim to shore.

But as he hitched his pea jacket over his head for protection from the heat and blinding fumes, in preparation for this desperate attempt, he felt a disturbing rumble and shifting beneath his feet. The ship quivered, then slowly tilted starboard a further fifteen degrees, accompanied by a metallic tearing from the great rent in the side of the hull, and a gurgling surge of water in the holds and below decks.

Jakes paused, head on one side. The rumbling continued as the pig iron and cargo shifted even more, and again the ship tilted further; but this time it did not stop. Jakes' nautically trained mind raced over this new development and how to cope with it: he knew that *The Viking* was tearing away from the huge undersea rock that was holding it in its grip for – for how long? He had no idea; time had almost ceased to exist.

There was no time to spare, and Jakes stumbled over bent and broken struts towards the only exit from the bridge. The 30° inclination, increasing with a series of heavy shudders, had allowed most of the heat and smoke to flow away from the starboard exit. He slung his life jacket over his head; and none too soon, for even as he tied the tapes, *The Viking* tipped faster, on past the point of no return, until she rolled over onto her side, exposing the great rent from the rock and her barnacle-encrusted hull.

With almost ridiculous ease, Jakes stepped off the bridge into the cold, surging sea, slicked with streamers of burning diesel and oil. Avoiding the spreading flames where he could, he struck out with all his strength to get away from the dying ship, and from the toxic fumes given off by the burning fuel and oil. He swam for about a hundred metres from the stricken *Viking* before treading water and pulling off his shoes. Jakes tried to look back at the ship on which he had served with Vickery for many years, but he had been out-paced by the spreading slicks of flaming oils, which spread like grasping fingers over the surface of the sea. His eyes were a clawing agony, his sight blurred. From bow to stern the ship was now wrapped in an almost unbroken spread of flame and smoke. Jakes tried to pick out where the bridge had been, but it too was shrouded in flames: a Viking's funeral, fit for the truest man and friend he had known.

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Tired as Jakes already was, the cold sea further sapped his strength. He kicked off his shoes, turned and paddled steadily towards the beach some distance off; but soon after he heard behind him a dull thud from within *The Viking's* hull, sending out shock waves that ran swiftly through the sea, followed almost immediately by a towering *whoosh* of exploding flames and gases, that funnelled upwards into a huge mushroom of brilliant light which enveloped the whole ship and far about. The deck had been ripped open, releasing an eye-searing fireball of super-heated oil and diesel.

It was late in the day and the light was fading, but in those moments the sky blazed, reflecting back a penetrating light from the low clouds. The bulk of the remaining fuel, oil and air, contained under some pressure from the growing heat, had reached a critical point, and had exploded as one, ripping open *The Viking's* deck and splitting her hull apart. In less than a minute most of the battered remains of the ship had sunk, attended by a sharp hissing of red-hot metal as it was drawn into the sea. Jakes had braced himself for the underwater shock wave which, had he been closer, might have killed him outright. At last it was over, and save for her broken-off bow still caught on the undersea rock, there was little left but floating swathes of burning fuel and oil, which in time would sink, or burn away to leave no trace of *The Viking's* death throes.

The shock wave was not as heavy as Jakes had anticipated; its main force having been driven skywards. After it had passed him by, he swam on, away from *The Viking's* grave. To keep his mind off the cold and the gradual stiffening of his limbs, Jakes set himself to reach the beach. At sea level it looked further away than in fact it was; but he had to make it. To drown now would be a poor and fruitless end, his promise to James Vickery unfulfilled. At all costs he must keep his mind on the beach, and not stop, or he could find himself too stiff to carry on.

The remaining crew, under Eric Blythe and the bo'sun, had got away in the single remaining lifeboat with the use of two pairs of oars; but there were too many men on board to maintain stability in the strong winds and turbulent sea, so for sheer need of space they were forced to abandon rowing, using only one oar

at the stern to keep the bows onto the sea as best they could. In addition to this, they had considerable difficulty starting the small petrol motor which, although shielded from the elements, had been unable to withstand the penetration of howling rain-drenching winds, or deluged by crashing waves. It took the bo'sun and one of the engineers nearly thirty minutes to dry all the electrical contacts, after which the engine reluctantly coughed into life.

But in that time winds and currents had swept the lifeboat a considerable distance southwards. With an under-powered engine and a heavily loaded lifeboat, Eric decided that it would be too difficult to attempt to recover the distance they had lost by sea; besides which he saw little point in doing so, for having heard nothing to the contrary, both he and the bo'sun assumed that Vickery, Jakes and the passengers had already got away in the gig. Their nearest beach was gently sloping and backed by low-lying land. It would make for an easy landing and walk northwards, keeping close to the coastline until they joined up with the Captain and his smaller group.

As the lifeboat chugged slowly towards the beach some three hundred metres ahead, helped by the regular lift and forward surge of the waves, they all saw in the middle distance the fireball that had spelt the final death of *The Viking*. With low cloud reflection and a darkening evening light, its enhanced brilliance shone about them, lighting up the lifeboat and all those in it in a bright yellow glow. But its light was such as none of them had ever seen before, for it penetrated equally into every corner, and into every feature of everyone on board; there were no shadows; all were bathed in this eerie and unearthly glow. A cold fear spread among the men, who sat like frozen statues while its radiance lit the sky and all about them. It could not last: half a minute, perhaps? Who could say, from a state of semi-trance? But with the sinking of *The Viking* the sea had poured in, quenching the source of the exploding gases from the oil and fuel, while the shadowless brilliance given out by the fireball faded and died away.

Seamen the world over are among the most superstitious people; and who can blame them, when the oceans cover two-

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thirds of the globe, and hold so many mysteries, so many secrets? Its capricious moods and vagaries bear with them an apparent inconstancy that can, on occasions, appear to defy the very laws of nature. Many strange tales are told by mariners, of ghost ships that glide silently by on the waves; of giant vortexes that can engulf even large ships; of monsters that sometimes rise from the dark depths. Wherever there are mysteries, there are fables; some true, others distorted by time and their retelling.

Yet withal these were simple men; men of the seas, men with an inborn wariness of the intangible and of that which cannot readily be explained. Consequently the impact of this eerie, inexplicable and penetrating light wracked their nerves and shook them to the core; men proven as steadfast and courageous, who had been through incredible dangers; men of character, shown again and again, and never more than on this last testing voyage of *The Viking's* crew.

Eric was about to talk to the men in an attempt to ease their fears, but the bo'sun was closer to them in matters of this nature; before Eric spoke he felt a restraining hand on his arm, and heard a low voice.

'With respect, sir, in their present states of mind the men just need to get away from the sea and this bay. After we've beached the lifeboat, I think it would be wiser to travel inland, and not take the coast route towards the north. They've had about all they can take.'

Eric saw that even the rock-steady bo'sun was shaken by what they had all seen and experienced, and knew that he was right in what he had said. Eric would have greatly preferred to follow the coastline north and link with the Captain and his group before turning inland, but the bo'sun and crew were jumpy after the fireball with its pervasive light; he knew his duty lay with the men directly under him. After all, he thought, they could veer towards the north as they walked, and would doubtless meet with the smaller group when they too would be walking inland.

'You're right, bo'sun,' Eric said quietly behind his hand, 'I'll tell them.' He did so, and there was a palpable sigh of relief among the eighteen remaining men, others having been either killed on board, or swept over the side by that last terrible wave.

After landing, Eric's group walked inland, carrying with them the hard rations from the lifeboat, then veered towards the north in the hope of meeting Vickery's party. After an hour or so they reached a point which both he and the bo'sun judged would intersect with the route that Vickery and Jakes would have taken. There they stopped, made a fire, and slept that night on the rough grass. The next morning Eric told some of his men to walk both north and south, to listen and watch for the Captain's party. They waited in this way for the rest of that day; at dusk the bo'sun called in his crewmen from both flanks, and for their second night they slept in the open. By morning both Eric Blythe and the bo'sun were forced to conclude that Vickery's party must have passed that way before them, even though there were no signs of their having done so. Eric toyed with the idea of using up yet more of their limited time by looking for the beach on which they should have landed, but he knew this would take several hours at least, and time was too valuable to spend on such a speculative issue, particularly in view of their very limited rations and water.

Eric Blythe had the forethought to grab his amply stuffed wallet from his cabin before embarking on the lifeboat. Apart from the fact that the Blue Circle Shipping Line's HQ for South America was in Rio de Janeiro, he knew that his crew's living facilities in any of the more southerly ports would be limited and costly, and probably not refundable by the Shipping Line; also the chance of catching one of their ships at any of these ports was slim, along with a high risk of the crew's dispersal to prey on his mind: by pooling their money, and with friendly advice from locals, Eric reckoned they had sufficient money to travel northwards the 3500 kilometres to Rio de Janeiro – their only sound option!

They made their way by any available means of transport, mostly in crowded and dusty buses; later as they travelled further north, they got third-class wooden slatted seats on a train to Rio. There they proved themselves to be more streetwise than Eric would have thought, and it was not long before the bo'sun had himself and the crew booked into the Seamen's Hostel near the harbour, the costs being covered by the Blue Circle Shipping Line from their offices in Rio de Janeiro. There the crew stayed until

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they were able to work their passages back to Liverpool on one of the Shipping Line's vessels.

For reasons that will become apparent, none of the crew ever did meet up with Vickery's group; neither did they ever hear about them, in spite of Eric's efforts through the shipping line's extensive contacts, and reporting the missing party to both the Argentinian and Brazilian authorities. However, in a unique fashion one man was taken to see and learn, although it is unlikely he will ever speak about it in public. Meanwhile, quite separately two others had an unusual dream which from its vivid revelation quelled any further curiosity on their parts.

Unknown to the crew but suspected by his fellow officers, Eric's father had taken early retirement as a Captain in the Norwegian Merchant Navy, and bought half shares into a profitable fishing fleet. He was a shrewd businessman so when his partner fell into debt on an unconnected matter, with help from his bank, the retired Captain Blythe bought his partner's half share. Eric's father was a generous and highly principled man and in consequence had put his fishing fleet's shares into dual ownership for himself and his only son, Eric. As a result Eric could in any emergency draw on his share of profit funds. He had never taken advantage of this before, but in the light of the apparent disappearance of Captain Vickery, his friend Jakes and the passengers, he felt it as not only his duty but an overwhelming need to go back and track down Vickery and his group; at the same time he wondered what had happened to their chief engineer, Gordon Mactavish. He picked up the phone in his hotel bedroom and rang his father.

The bo'sun was very reluctant to leave his officer to pursue a lone hunt; but with dubious logic Eric pointed out that it was the bo'sun's responsibility to see the remaining crew back to Liverpool; Eric felt also that it was vital he give the Blue Circle Shipping Line his personal report on the sinking of *The Viking* and the loss of several men; he also stressed his doubts that the directors would agree to paying the bo'sun any salary if he remained in Rio with the intention of joining up with one of *The Viking's* officers, to go on what they would consider to be 'a wild goose chase'. With a wife and young family at home, the bo'sun

was persuaded that he could not afford to take this risk. Pulled by diverse loyalties, he reluctantly agreed. A week later Eric saw the bo'sun, with the remaining crew of eighteen men, on to *The Scythia*, one of the Blue Circle ships in dock at Rio de Janeiro.

Meanwhile, back with the sea of flame and the dying *Viking*, Jakes swam on with grim determination. His eyes were hurting badly, and he could barely see. Keeping them open, he ducked his head under water, but it didn't help; he knew the fumes from the burning oil slicks were the cause, and that without medical help he could lose his sight. Dimly he could make out the shore and a line of breaking surf. Not far to go now. Later, close to the beach, a cresting wave lifted him up, curled over and crumpled under him as it crashed on the steeply rising seabed. Disorientated, and struggling blindly in the turmoil, he was spun up the beach in a wide splay of racing sea and foam; but before he could get any grip on the sandy bottom, he was turned by the swirling sea, and drawn back in a semicircular movement, to be whirled and pounded by the next huge roller, before again being shot forwards amidst the thunderous crash of another breaking wave.

By this time Jakes was half stunned, barely able to see, his vitality drained by the cold water. In desperation he dug his feet and fingers into the sand, clawing against the drag of a spent wave as it sought to swallow him in the maw of the next rising giant. In spite of his efforts he felt his body sliding, slowly at first, then faster as the sand ran away from under his fingers and feet in the hungry suction of back-rushing water. Just in time two figures loomed up in front of him, grabbed his wrists, and pulled him up and out of the sea onto the beach: Jim Maitland and Father Paulos, while behind them stood a wet, anxious and bedraggled Ruth in the dim light of dusk.

'We saw you making heavy weather in the sea a few minutes back. It's not very far, but it's quite a swim,' said Maitland in his laconic, almost conversational tone. 'We had quite a battle, but Paulos proved to be a surprisingly strong swimmer, and Ruth is so light we hardly felt any drag from her.'

Jakes sat up, shivering; although the air was warm, it would take some time to get any heat back into his deeply chilled body.

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He was no longer a young man, and while he was hardy from many years at sea, the stresses put on them all during the last few days, but perhaps especially on Eric and himself, followed by his heart rending time on the bridge with the mortally wounded Vickery, gasping in the heat and smoke, and finally his swim to the beach, struggling in the deoxygenated air and toxic fumes from the burning oil slick – all this, and stricken by virtual blindness and the loss of his truest friend, had sapped his vitality and weakened his resistance.

‘Thank you,’ he gasped, ‘I was just about all in. Swam through burning oil and diesel around *The Viking*. My eyes are damaged. I can hardly see; only dark blurred shapes.’

‘Come to the fire and get warm,’ Paulos interjected. ‘My lighter was still working, so we managed to get a fire going. There’s plenty of driftwood around.’

Jakes did not protest when he was helped to his feet; Paulos took him by the arm and helped him along and up the slope of the beach where they were building up a small but rapidly growing fire. He said nothing, but stared at the faint glow, feeling the heat soak into him from the flames he could barely see. Exhausted and worn, Jakes was bewildered and terrified at his loss of sight. Blind and helpless, he thought; blind on some lonely and unknown beach! It took all his will power to quell the shock and growing panic that could sap his reason. Stunned, he sat by the fire, letting the welcome warmth spread slowly through his body. Paulos sat next to him, and Jakes could feel in his silence a generous sympathy and wish to help. He was grateful, but there was nothing anyone could do for him in their present predicament.

‘What happened to Henry Curtis and Pietro?’ he asked.

‘Maitland’s looking out for them right now. He’s standing behind us on the highest point of the beach. In the rough sea we lost sight of them quite early on and were unable to regain contact, our voices were blown away in the wind. We might have found them had we swum around for a while, but the water’s too cold and we had Ruth to get to the shore. We’ve been here for perhaps twenty minutes before we pulled you out of the sea. It was only because we were on the lookout that you were spotted

and we were able to haul you ashore. We had no idea what had happened to you after we dived off the stern. If Curtis doesn't make it quite soon, I doubt if he and Pietro will survive the cold.'

Paulos's voice was cut off at that moment by a loud hail from Maitland who had spotted the pair quite close to the shore. Pietro was swimming beside Curtis, who was moving sluggishly, his strength spent. Paulos leapt to his feet, and he and Maitland ran to the shore. A wave curled over, carrying both tired swimmers on its crest before crashing onto the coarse sand of the beach, spewing them towards the two waiting men. In a moment Maitland grabbed Pietro who, being far lighter, had skimmed the frothing surf more readily than Curtis; he pulled the boy out of the water, and practically flung him up the beach where the backwash of the spent wave could not reach him.

Meanwhile Paulos had caught hold of Curtis's wrist, but Henry was a heavy man, and too far gone to make more than a feeble effort to dig his fingers and feet into the sand; as a result, both men were being drawn back towards the next curling wave, for Paulos would not let go. Maitland saw their dilemma, and splashed his way across to grab Curtis's other wrist; together the two of them managed to stop his slide back into the sea, and with their combined strength they hauled him up onto the dry beach.

Jakes knew what was going on by their voices and calls. He wanted to help, but felt deeply frustrated and useless while his sight was so dim and hopelessly blurred, made increasingly hard as the twilight was quite rapidly fading into the darkness of night. Just then he heard light feet approaching, and a young hand slid into his large and hardened palm.

'Come, let me guide you,' came Pietro's voice in response to Jakes' inner anguish.

'Thank you; but you must be cold and tired, and the fire is warm. We must bring your guardian here to get warm. How did you know?' Jakes' speech was disjointed, as were his thoughts at that time; but in the same breath he knew that his question needed no answer, although he could never have explained why. He got to his feet, frustrated and angry at himself for still feeling weak from the cold and his last arduous hours.

Together they made their way across to where Paulos and

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Maitland stood, wondering how to move Curtis without physically dragging him: Jakes' presence solved the problem, and between the three of them they managed to carry him, water-sodden and limp, to the warmth of their fire.

Henry Curtis had burst his heart under the terrific strain; he was barely conscious, and so drained of strength that for a while he had no control over his limbs. They took off his life jacket and outer clothing to dry, and to allow the heat from the now blazing fire to warm his body and limbs. Ruth slept on the sand next to Curtis, worn out by the terrors and strains of the day. Pietro sat on the other side to Ruth, holding Henry's hand, his face a gentle mask of sadness, for he loved this great man who had saved both Ruth and himself from the slums of Rio de Janeiro; or so Paulos thought as he looked at them both.

In the dwindling light, Maitland and Paulos set off to build up their stock of driftwood, enough to last them through the night, leaving Jakes by the fire; for without his sight, even in the cold moonlight that followed, he would be more of a hindrance than a help. While the two men were coming and going with armfuls of wood, Curtis regained sufficient strength to raise himself on one elbow; he knew his life was ebbing away, and whether he went that night or the next, still he would never leave this narrow strip of beach alive and in his body. He said nothing, but looked at Pietro with great tenderness, his feelings shining briefly through his eyes, before he lay back again. Every undue effort brought on a sharp pain and pounding from his heart. 'Don't leave me,' he whispered.

'You know I won't,' replied Pietro, equally quietly. 'Remember my promise.'

Henry remembered very well, and was content. Then he spoke to Jakes. 'What happened to Captain Vickery? The last we know was that you were going back to the bridge to see how matters stood, and to do what you could to help your crew.'

Jakes had heard Curtis move, and every word that was spoken. His recent almost total loss of sight had been a terrible shock. Cut off and nervous, apprehensive and withdrawn, he had been afraid even to speak; but as his perceptions were sharpening, he felt a growing need to communicate with those around him. He found

these contrary switches in his personality to be unnerving and destabilising; something he might have to become used to, at least for the time being. Then, because of his blindness, Jakes experienced a growing horror of being a burden on the others when they were ready to leave the beach – a state which he determined would not be allowed to happen. This feeling of being useless gave him a transitory bond with Curtis; temporary, because Henry was dying and would soon be gone – while, save for his virtual blindness, Jakes was in good health. These troubled thoughts racked his mind before he answered.

‘Captain Vickery died on his bridge, crushed by the bridge housing. Some of the bolted-down struts that wedded the housing to the deck were rusted, then loosened or broken by the severe gales. We knew this, but with so much to attend to there was no time for repairs before we struck the underwater rock. With the mountainous wave, that shock must have snapped the last of the sound stays, bringing the main housing down onto my friend and Captain, James Vickery. I was with him when he died.’

Jakes’ last seven words were spoken almost in a whisper, for in spite of himself tears were running down his cheeks. In that moment he had forgotten about his listeners; the wound from Vickery’s death was too painful, too raw, and with his blindness and the pain in his eyes, almost more than he could bear.

By that time Paulos and Maitland had stacked more than enough driftwood to see them through the night, and much of the following morning; they joined the other four of them around the fire, and caught up with what Jakes was telling Henry Curtis, but pressed him for further news; he obliged them with what he knew about the ship’s remaining lifeboat – that it had got away safely with the rest of the crew under Eric Blythe and the bo’sun. Jakes knew there must have been a hitch, probably the engine, as they were expected to make for the cliff-backed beach on which his own party had landed; that being so, they would have drifted on a southerly course further down the coast.

‘Why south and not north?’ interjected Maitland.

‘Because prevailing winds and currents from the cyclonic storm are flowing from north to south, down the coast of the bay,’ Jakes replied. ‘Each of our two lifeboats – when we had two –’ he

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added wryly, 'had a small petrol motor of modest power and range, and a sail that could be hoisted. I'm surmising here, but I think we must have lost some of our crew when we struck the undersea rock in the bay. Many had been working on deck, and no matter how they tried to take shelter, they would be very exposed to the last huge wave. If so, then their lifeboat would have been very overloaded, with up to twenty men, which would have made rowing virtually impossible in their cramped conditions.

'Eric would have tried the motor, but he must have had trouble starting it. The engine was shielded from the normal amount of spray and rain, but could hardly have withstood the many deluges we've had. Our two main lifeboats each had a capacity of fifteen persons; loaded with twenty men, the remaining starboard boat would have been a third overloaded, and that's a lot in a small craft. Their design weakness lay in the engines; diesel would have been better; no amount of shielding can guarantee a petrol engine staying dry enough to start. With the tarpaulin covers torn aside by the crashing waves, I'd be very surprised if Eric's crew didn't have to waste precious time drying out the motor under cramped and wet conditions.

'Being overloaded in these seas, the boat could have become water-logged and either sunk or capsized, in which case they would have had to swim for it; but knowing Eric and the bo'sun – both very capable seamen – it's more likely that it was just the engine that gave them trouble, during which time they would have drifted south. I hope they'll march north along the coastline tomorrow and meet up with us.'

Normally Jakes was not a talkative person, but with every word he spoke he felt a release of tension.

'Before we go any further,' put in Maitland, 'I should point out that while we have an ample supply of spring water from the cliff that backs on to this beach, we have no food, and no means of getting any that I can see...'

'Wait!' interrupted Jakes. 'Do you have your life jackets?' They all did. 'Good, then we have food enough to sustain us for twelve days.' He felt the rising tide of hope, tinged with a wary scepticism, but carried on. 'On the right side of every life jacket

The Viking carried is a top-zipped pocket, easy to miss; in that pocket you'll find a vacuum-sealed waterproof packet in which are twelve ship's biscuits; they're large, rough in texture and filling, and each one has in it sufficient nutrition to sustain an adult for a full day. I should have told you about this before, but with all the problems we've had on this last trip, I regret it slipped my mind. I suggest we all have one now.'

As Jakes was talking, Paulos and Maitland were exploring their life jackets, and with relief found and took out the packets; with the exception of Curtis they were all ravenous, and were soon munching on the first of their biscuits which, as Jakes had said, they found to be both filling and satisfying. Afterwards, now quite exhausted, Paulos and Pietro made Henry Curtis as comfortable as possible, and they all settled down to sleep.

Before the sun had risen, Maitland set out in the half-light of pre-dawn to explore the beach on which they had landed. He was soon joined by Paulos, and together they trudged its length and breadth, back and forth, seeking a route inland which would avoid having to climb the cliff. They searched for an hour, only to confirm that they were trapped on the beach backed by a bleak, almost vertical, cliff. They went back to where the other castaways were waiting for them in the slanting rays of the early morning sun. The air was chilly, and Pietro and Ruth were boosting the fire with the last of their driftwood. Unable to see, Jakes was standing and stretching. Curtis's breathing had become very ragged, and Maitland doubted if he would last out the day. He said nothing, and neither did Paulos who, as a priest, was acquainted with the dying. Both felt that any words of comfort they might make would be an intrusion, for the bond between Curtis and Pietro was very apparent. It was also plain that Henry had accepted his inevitable end with grace and courage.

They sat down and Maitland spoke for them both. 'After a badly needed night's rest, and in the clearer light, we were able to explore both beach and cliff more thoroughly. The beach itself is not much more than three hundred metres in length; the sand on which we're sitting extends about halfway up, then merges into shingle; the shingle deepens the further up the beach one goes. I

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should tell you that the cliff is very steep; at least two of our party would not be able to climb it. Lastly, like the horns of a buffalo, the cliff reaches well into the sea at both ends of the beach, extending offshore until it drops below the waves about sixty metres out. However, it's a formidably jagged, razor-sharp barrier to climb over to see how the shores lie on either side. I've never before seen anything like this geological formation... perhaps it's unique. We haven't been fortunate landing here; in effect this beach is a trap, from which it'll be very difficult to escape inland, especially when time is not on our side.'

Paulos cut in, addressing Jakes and Curtis. 'By the way, did either of you see the fireball when *The Viking* exploded?'

Jakes had seen it as he had been comparatively close to the ship when it finally blew up, since at that stage he could still see well enough to catch such a brilliant light. Maitland had also seen it, but in his determination to reach the shore before he and Ruth were too cold to go on, he paid the phenomenon scant attention. Curtis lay still and did not answer, but Paulos knew he had seen it; but none of them remarked on its strange effects, for being in the sea and weary, their eyes were drawn to the fireball itself; also the sea was translucent, and the turbulence itself would have broken up any unusual lighting.

'Well,' Paulos went on, having heard that the others had seen no more than the fireball itself, 'it was very strange; while the fireball lasted, which was not long, every feature of this cliff shone with equal light; there were no shadows. The same applied to what I could see of the beach when I was lifted on a wave. I've never seen anything like it – it was incredible!'

'There must be a logical explanation,' said Jakes. 'Magnesium flares, for instance, can have a similar effect; but from what you said nothing by comparison to the ship's fireball. Anyway, my eyes are no better and I need to stretch my legs. If Pietro will stay with Henry, perhaps Ruth would like to take my hand and we'll walk around the beach. I think it would be unwise to attempt to move inland today. I suggest that Maitland and Paulos try again to find a route over or around the cliff; I find it hard to believe that there's no easier way to escape from this beach.'

Both men took Jakes' hint on delaying a day. Curtis was

plainly dying, and they could not leave him alone; besides, they all knew that Pietro would never leave him while he lived. Meanwhile, Ruth was delighted with the plan of action; she had always been tremendously drawn to Jakes, feeling in her budding young mind that his apparent aloofness only hid a heart just waiting to be touched; now her motherly instincts rose to the fore as she ran to him and firmly took his hand in hers. How rightly her young heart had spoken!

Henry Curtis knew people far better than most, and had a deep understanding of life, which sprang in part from experience and suffering, but also from a reflective mind that had always sought for truth within the distorting medley of life. This quality was supported by an inborn sense of precognition... But Pietro? Deep in his mind Henry groped for the answer, an answer that had been with him for some time, but buried in his subconscious, and which even his openness of mind had been reluctant to raise and accept.

But now he was very tired, tired deep inside, as he felt death's cold mantle being drawn up his limbs. Dimly, as at a great distance he had heard movements, and then voices; but they were no longer a part of his life; soon he would be with his beloved Mary; beyond that not much else seemed to matter. He felt Pietro's hand in his, and then a warm kiss on his cheek. Weakly he turned his head to look into his eyes, seeking confirmation of what he had to know; but there was no reply. Henry Curtis died peacefully, and quite unnoticed by his companions, save for one; and him a boy of twelve, Pietro.

As Henry's spirit rose from his body, he saw next to it a young person of light; the Pietro he had known, a personage of great beauty who wept silently for him, whose tears rolled slowly down his face to fall upon the living sand; one who had leant over and kissed him, and had quietly whispered in his ear, 'Now you know what I am. Do not forget me; I will be with you again.'

They had finished talking for the time being, and the three men were rising to move away from the fire; but before they moved off Pietro had got to his feet and touched Maitland's arm.

'Sir, my friend and guardian has just died.'

Pietro's words were simply spoken, but there was music and

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pathos in his voice which drew their immediate attention.

'My God!' exclaimed Father Paulos. 'We never noticed, and we weren't with him at the last.' Anxiety was clearly written on his face, an anxiety reflecting a mixture of feelings, and a growing shock that this good, kind man was no longer with them.

'I was with him,' said Pietro, 'and all of you were very close by him. There's no need for sadness; he went peacefully and happily.'

For a moment there was silence, for in the face of Pietro's direct and simply spoken words, there was nothing of greater value that any of them could have added without sounding banal.

Maitland was the first to speak. 'Come, we must carry his body to the top of the beach, in the lee of the cliff; we can bury him there where the shingle is deep; there is no better place. Henry was a big man, and walking up a slope of loose shingle will be a little tricky; we'll need all three of us to carry him. Ruth can be your eyes, Mr Jakes.'

Ruth nodded vigorously. She had hardly left Jakes' side, and only reluctantly let go of his hand, holding onto him like a small boat in a storm: with the loss of Henry Curtis, familiar feelings of instability and fear swept through her shaking body. Her young life had been torn apart and shocked to the core; her parents murdered on that dark and terrible evening; their house plundered and burnt to the ground. Ruth could not remember how long ago; it seemed an eternity; but she recalled in all its stark horror the short, sharp sequence of events deeply etched on her mind, and which now rose to the surface...

Her father, who was in some way involved with the Italian Embassy, had that evening been working downstairs in his office, while she had been with her mother in their big bedroom. Here, as a rare concession, Ruth had been allowed to go through and admire some of her exquisite jewellery. She remembered her mother as beautiful and serene, magnificent and brave, but cold. She had often tried to break through this barrier, but without success. Ruth had security, but little real love, and the little she had came from her father, who was devoted to his daughter, but who was also intensely self-conscious when it came to displaying his deeper feelings; then, as he became increasingly busy, worried

and harassed, so did his inhibitions and restraint increase. So now, like a limpet, Ruth was ready to cling to almost any firm rock.

On that last black and terrible day they both heard the sounds of movement below, followed by a brief scuffle, a thud and a muffled cry – then silence. Ruth heard no voices, but waves of fear swept through her as they caught the darkly menacing strides of footsteps climbing quickly up the stairs.

With a swiftness she had never before seen, Ruth recalled her mother's reactions. Like a doe at bay, her calm serenity swept aside, she sprang over the bed and across the room in a flurry of skirts, and locked and bolted the door; after which she tried to hide Ruth in a closet, but there had been no time before the door was smashed and kicked open by a short, strongly built man, dark and swarthy, gripping a vicious-looking dagger in his hand. Following him into the room was the biggest and ugliest woman Ruth had ever seen. Her skin was flaccid and yellow, her eyes slanting and narrow. Her mother could only push Ruth behind her back before the woman was on her; moving quickly and lightly despite her bulk, the woman chopped the heel of her hand down on to her mother's neck. Pole-axed, she fell to the floor, but had scarcely touched the carpet when the swarthy man stepped forward and grasped Ruth's mother by the hair, tugged her head back, and in one swift movement he slid his razor-sharp knife across her throat.

For a moment blood spurted into the air, falling back onto her mother's face and dress, before pumping slowly in rhythmic gout. Ruth stood frozen to the floor, stunned, staring in horror as every action imprinted itself indelibly on her mind. Then the spell broke and she screamed, the terrible piercing cry of mortal hurt; the last sound she would utter for a long time. The next moment she leapt towards the door, half torn from its hinges and hanging askew, and was through it before either of the fast-moving assassins could stop her. Ruth ran down the stairs, past the open study where, encircled by blood, she glimpsed her father's body hanging in his swivel chair. With madness and terror tearing at her heels she sped out into the back garden, followed by the dark, swarthy man.

Fear leant Ruth wings, and although she could hear the dark

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man's swiftly pounding feet closing in on her, once she was through the open glass door into the garden and the darkening shadows of early night, the advantage lay with her, as she knew every nook and cranny of their extensive grounds. She darted hither and thither, from shadow to shadow, working her way towards the back of the garden, while the man cursed and clumsily crashed his way in pursuit at a safe distance; then she slid through an opening into the next garden, and in this manner passed through three gardens, before making her way through to the front of the last one and onto the road. She stopped briefly and looked back along the road, making sure that she was not being followed. There was nobody, only their own car, and behind it another, parked some way off so as not to attract any inquisitive eyes to the murders, and any evidence that may have drawn undue attention to themselves.

Ruth was about to turn and run on, when she saw flames beginning to lick up the sides of their wooden house. Mesmerised, she watched as the fire caught hold; in a minute or so, their house, with the burning bodies of her parents, had become a single flaming torch. Her fear of the two murderers left her, replaced by a great sense of loneliness. Now she knew she had no one; not even the sight of the murderous couple touched her as they walked quickly to their car. Alone now, she turned and ran, ran down towards the slums of Rio where she could hide forever.

These memories and fears sped through Ruth's mind in a timeless moment. She raised her head and looked into Pietro's shining eyes as he stood by Henry Curtis's body: Pietro had met her in the slums, and had taken care of her. He understood. With him, she had known the love and protection of Henry Curtis, and Grace Geldart's warm affection, before she had been swept overboard. So much had happened since she had known Pietro. The darkness fell back and she was content to leave her pain and fears in his hands.

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When Ruth had looked into Pietro's eyes, she felt a soothing inner peace wash through her, gently easing away past pains from her torn mind; yet he was kneeling by the body of Henry Curtis, his tears falling like drops of blood from his heart; some fell onto Henry's face, others onto the dry sand where they sank without trace. Ruth knew instinctively that Pietro wept not for Henry Curtis, but that his heart was deeply touched by the greatness and love of the man; their saviour and guardian who had done so much, who had rescued them both from the slums of Rio de Janeiro; and then, as Pietro knew well, he had given wholeheartedly the last of his strength and life to get him ashore from the sinking ship. Even so, Ruth saw what she understood – that which touched her, but not the whole.

This scene was not lost on Maitland, who when he saw Pietro's tears, got to his feet and went to him; but his legs were leaden, for he was torn between this act of warmth and his more simulated toughness; a front he had worn for years as a shield against intrusive invaders, or perhaps himself. Yet he was not an unkindly man, and in spite of his facade to the world, he was touched by the child who sat so still and so alone. He put an arm around the boy's shoulders, but even with his own emotional capitulation, he was embarrassed and silent, unused to exhibiting his personal feelings; but still his enclosing arm tightened slightly, while at almost the same time his hand wandered uncertainly over Pietro's head. He could have been rebuffed and on his hauteur had the weeping boy shown any signs of revulsion, but in fact Pietro's young hand touched his own in an act of understanding and trust.

In that moment Maitland's armour fell away, along with his hidden fears and inhibitions; his heart was deeply stung, and his eyes blurred as he keenly realised, perhaps too late, a yawning

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need for love that rose uncontrollably within him; a need so demanding and pure, yet so shy in its idealism, that from that moment he blamed himself for ever allowing the world's third-rate standards to create him in a harder mould; a tempting mould that had enhanced his name in travel, excitement and danger, along with a certain degree of transitory awe wherever he went and was known.

His had been the mould of a soldier of fortune, of one whose proven courage was never doubted; but it was also the mould of a coward, of one who was fleeing from his true self, and whose vulnerability to the wounds and scars of life betrayed only a fear of his finer self, along with a deeply ingrained dread of its exposure. Now a child had broken the seal and had effortlessly, even unknowingly perhaps, reached in and plucked his heart from within his innermost self; that most secret part of his soul which had lain hidden and locked away, almost forgotten, for about thirty years. Yet Jim Maitland was strangely content with his lot, and more wholly at peace with himself than ever before.

For a brief space the tableau hung suspended in time. Paulos was on his knees in prayer at Henry Curtis's side, his face strained and pale. The past day, capped now by Curtis's death, had sapped his wiry strength and brought on a partial relapse into a state of mental shock. He squatted back on his heels, anxiety and bewilderment clearly written on his features. More than ever before he realised now how much he had looked up to Henry Curtis, how he had depended on his calm strength and presence. Now that strength had left them; this good, kind man was no longer there, leaving only a whisper of his presence in the air. Paulos, normally nervous and shy, felt very alone, empty and afraid.

With no embarrassment now, Maitland withdrew his arm from about Pietro's shoulders, and rose to his feet. 'Come, we can't just sit here for the rest of the day; we must carry Henry's body to the top of the beach under the foot of the cliff.'

Pietro nodded. 'You must take my guardian's outer clothes; you will need them.'

Maitland was indeed painfully aware of his scantily clad state in underclothes and trousers; he was also feeling increasingly cold

as the wind's raw chill bit into his flesh. Nevertheless, he looked sharply at Pietro as though a bomb had suddenly exploded in the newly discovered quietness of his mind, and his jaw dropped slightly in surprise and shock at Pietro's suggestion, coming as it did after such a genuine show of grief at his guardian's death. But there was a clarity and truth in his eyes and expression that waived aside any doubts, and with it a sense of reality and assurance that flooded through him, easing away the niggling doubts and apparent contradictions before they could again become fixed in a self-destructive cycle.

Maitland got slowly to his feet; he was learning to embrace a new outlook – and from a child! He shook his head, puzzled, but could find no stray ends; indeed, he felt a bond with this child's spirit, and rather would he go against himself – that struggled not at all – than attempt to tear asunder this new relationship; a union which in a few brief moments had unravelled years of false and intricately tangled knots.

'Come on, old chap,' Maitland said quietly, laying a hand on Paulos's arm. 'Jakes is ready with Ruth, so together we must carry Henry's body up the beach.'

Paulos looked up; his movements were heavy and his eyes unseeing, inward-looking. Brusquely, Maitland shook him by the shoulder, recognising his shocked and paralysed state, and applying the best possible remedy under the circumstances. 'Snap out of it, Paulos!' he said crisply. Then he added more quietly, 'You can't help him now; we're still here, and we need you.'

The sharp treatment was effective: Paulos's eyes refocused on the blur that had been Maitland's face. He blinked bemusedly and weakly for a moment, before staggering heavily to his feet. 'You're right; I'm sorry. What do you want me to do?' He was still dazed, but his senses were coming back.

'Well done,' responded Maitland firmly, but not unkindly. He knew only too well some of the radical recoveries that can be brought about by shock and firmness. He switched his attention to Jakes who was standing ready at his shoulder, Ruth firmly holding his hand. 'Right, Paulos and I will take his shoulders and head, if you will take his legs, Jakes; that way you're less likely to stumble, especially with Ruth to guide you. Don't worry too

much about your eyes,' he went on. 'I'm not a doctor, but they don't look too bad to me, and they may well recover in time.' Maitland spoke to encourage Jakes, who had looked depressed and lost ever since he had recovered after landing on the beach; but when he looked at the damage done by fire and toxic fumes to Jakes' face, he doubted the truth of his encouraging words.

The flesh burns were not so severe that a good plastic surgeon could not have patched him up to look very much as he had before – but his eyes! Those sightless, staring orbs were flat, almost empty of life and expression, and Maitland, doctor or not, knew only too well that Jakes would be blind for the rest of his life.

'I'm afraid not,' replied Jakes quietly. 'I know the damage that burning oil and fuel can do; I've seen several cases in my time. If one can get the patient to a specialist within an hour or two, then there's a good chance of at least a partial recovery; but in my case, here on a forgotten beach hundreds of miles from any eye clinic –' he paused – 'when every minute and hour counts! No, no chance at all.' He bent down. 'I've got his legs; lift Curtis's torso, and we'll move him up the beach away from here.'

Without further ado, they carried Henry Curtis's body up the steepening shingle; but Jakes' mind was only mechanically on the grim task in hand. In spite of his easy-mannered response to Maitland's well-meant words to calm his mind, he was in fact completely stunned by this twist of fate that had robbed him of his sight, leaving him no better than a helpless, useless burden; he wished he had stayed on *The Viking* and gone down with his friend. Never again, he realised, would he man the bridge of a ship, nor see the clarity of the stars at night against their inky backdrop, or the dawn's early brilliance spread shimmering shafts of light in long, broken lines on the ripples of a calm sea.

He dragged his mind away from these thoughts, for there lay despair; yet he determined that he would place no impediment against death, should that possibility arise; with his loss of sight and his only true friend dead, what was there left to live for? Then he felt the tug of Ruth's hand on his sleeve; he looked down, and although he could not see her face, he felt the warmth of her spirit flowing into him. He looked down and smiled at her, and

there was something both touching and attractive in his smile. Here, he thought, is a child who sees me as I was; even perhaps as I really am; she doesn't see my scarred face. In that moment, however impractical, he remembered James Vickery's words: to care for these two children, and that Pietro would fill a great need in his life. A ray of hope, and more than hope, brightened the darkness in his mind.

To Jakes' credit, it never once entered his head that had he left the ship earlier, and not waited by James Vickery's side as he lay dying, he could have easily avoided the amount of burning oil and fuel as it leaked in increasing quantities into the sea; he knew this was so, but in the fine clarity of love and loyalty he bore his friend, he could not have acted in any other way.

They buried Henry Curtis a little more than two feet under a deep layer of shingle, parallel to the foot of the cliff. It was the best they could do, for the deeper they went, clawing up the pebbles, the steeper the sides became, until it reached a point where their roll-back was as great as the shingle they removed with such labour. At last the job was done, and Henry Curtis's body was lowered into its last resting place; after which the pebbles around were pushed back until they made a considerable mound: a far cry from the Africa Henry Curtis had loved. Paulos then knelt and quickly mumbled his way through some prayers for the dead; but his manner was nervous and hesitant which, even bearing in mind the circumstances, was strange – and Maitland wondered.

Both sea and wind were still high. The rhythmic thunder of the great waves on the shore line became a backdrop to their lives on the beach, which was in no way obtrusive, even peaceful to the small group as the rhythm eased their nerves. But the powerful gusting winds were another matter, for their force was deflected by the formation of the cliff with its flanking shafts reaching into the sea, sending lonely haunting wails that howled about them at irregular intervals, gnawing at their nerves. Paulos suffered the most; Maitland to a lesser extent, although it made him irritable. Jakes was a man of the sea, so was not unduly troubled by it; in fact he was so engrossed in his memories and thoughts that at present not much else seemed to touch him; nothing, that is, save

for Ruth who, as soon as Curtis had been buried, regardless of Jakes' burnt face, again took charge of his hand, so greatly did she need the security which, unaware to himself, was an inbuilt quality of the man; there was also an enhanced pathos about Jakes that reached out to Ruth's own hollow loss and loneliness.

With Pietro, the burial party trudged back to the dying embers of their fire. Paulos was the first to speak. 'We're now on the second of our twelve days on ship's biscuit, iron rations. We must get off this beach, no matter the cost; if we don't we'll simply die of starvation here, or if the howling wind doesn't drive us mad beforehand! I'm willing to try and climb the cliff.'

'I agree with you,' cut in Maitland, 'but have you any previous climbing experience?'

'Quite a bit, but less during the past few years. My work on a mission station in the Amazon basin gave me few opportunities. On the other hand, bear in mind that I'm lightly built, which is a considerable asset. I know you've had a fair amount of climbing experience; but you're in your fifties, while I am still only forty years of age. It's better we go singly, and that I go first; partly because of the children and Jakes, and that we are in effect the only two fit adults in our party. If at all possible it's not right to leave them alone. Sometimes it's not easy to see what lies ahead, so as I climb you can call and direct me if this becomes necessary... Better to risk one arm, from which you can learn if I fail, than to lose two.'

Maitland nodded. 'You put a good case, but you've forgotten how within the last hour you were on the point of passing out. From our swim from the ship, you've shown that you're physically fit; but to be frank, have you the mental stamina to climb the cliff – at least, not as the first to attempt it? It's better to be honest in this matter; there's too much at stake. I'm fit and have been climbing quite recently, so I must insist on being the first to try it. There's enough time for both of us in turn to try today. Meanwhile, remember that our object is not just to reach the top, but to find the easiest route.'

With a small bottle of water (also from their life jackets), they trudged up the beach together. When they were out of earshot of Jakes and the children, Paulos brought up the burning question

that was rankling in both their minds. 'I couldn't mention this before, but what if you do find a passable route up the cliff, one that we can manage, and the children with some help, but not Jakes, who can't see his hand before his face? We can't leave him; he's a big man – but without ropes to guide and pull him up...?'

'The same problem has obviously been on my mind, and I've no doubt that Jakes is fully aware of the situation. I'm also sure that he has no intention of impeding our escape, assuming we take the two children. No one has spoken of it until now, but we all know. My answer is simple and logical: if we stay on this beach, we all remain to die. With Henry's biscuits we have twelve days of iron rations from tomorrow. I am sure I will reach the top, at which point I think I should press on ahead and make my way directly inland until I find the nearest homestead, and help for all of us. You must use your judgment: if I climb it more easily than it appears, then you may be able to follow with one or both of the children, even with Jakes; this is where your comparative youth and physical vitality could be of greater value than I could be. However, it's impossible to make any fixed plan of action at this stage; you must act as you think best. With our twelve days' rations you'll have time on your side. But who knows? The best laid plans of mice and men...!'

Paulos was quite mollified at Maitland's response, and with it the implied responsibility laid on his shoulders. In truth, he was not anxious to be the first to tackle the cliff, especially without ropes or climbing equipment.

Maitland quickly fitted himself up for the climb, stood back for a short time, mentally mapping his route as far as he could see. He chose a spot near their northern boundary, and started to climb.

Paulos returned to where Jakes and the children were waiting by the fire. They had been collecting some driftwood and had got the fire going again from its embers. For a few moments there was silence as they all warmed themselves by the flames.

'These iron-ration biscuits are very good,' said Jakes, 'but they don't put much heat into one's body. Pietro and Ruth tell me that Maitland is making an attempt to climb the cliff; I assume you're watching his route. Do you think he'll make it to the top?'

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Paulos gave one of his rare smiles. 'He's going well, but he hasn't yet got to the part that is virtually smooth rock and nearly vertical. Yes, he's good; better than I expected for a man of his age; probably better than I am at only forty. I think he has a good chance of reaching the top.' Then, in short nervous sentences, Paulos went on to explain quickly what they were attempting to do, for he had to move back away from the cliff face as Maitland was nearing a hazardous point in his climb.

'By the way,' put in Jakes, 'don't concern yourselves about my rescue from this beach; handicapped as I now am, I would only be a severe hindrance to you and others – perhaps a fatal one. If you find rescuers once you've worked your way inland, then you can send them back for me. However, it is vital that you get these two children out, and take them to Henry's married daughter – Lucinda, if I remember correctly.'

'I wouldn't worry about that now. We're in this together, and I can't see you being left here,' Paulos lied. 'Now I must check on Maitland's route.'

Maitland was cautiously apprehensive about this awkward climb, but also glad of the peace it afforded him. His thoughts were divided, random and sporadic; yet withal his mind kept going back to Pietro when he had knelt by Curtis's body, and his own subsequent inclusion into the scene. This led in an immeasurable space of time to a complete change of heart and outlook within himself, followed by a peace of mind that he'd never known before. Life had taken on a new and exciting dimension. Now there was a purpose in its very creation; in nature which, while it might grandly inspire, yet not even a blade of grass or a whisper of wind could man create of himself. The wonder of life, the senses of movement and growth leaped like spring within him. He found it hard to keep his mind on the very real and pressing problems that beset them, and which should have weighed heavily on his shoulders.

Then he slipped! He recovered himself, and in that flashing moment in time, he was jerked back to his task: to climb this cliff. He had set himself the task, which was not proving to be as hard as he had feared when on the beach, as there were occasional handholds invisible to anyone standing at a distance.

He made slow and often erratic progress up the cliff face. Watching from below, Paulos realised that on the slightly bulging surface he would have far greater difficulty following Maitland's progress; so he moved back, and then further to the fire with Jakes and the children. From here he could see all the way to the top. He sat on the sand facing the cliff. Paulos was nervous, and had to talk to someone; Jakes intuitively realised this, and opened the conversation.

'How's Maitland doing?' It was a superfluous question, since he had been getting running reports from both Pietro and Ruth, but enough to release Paulos from his nervous silence. A detailed description followed, after which he tailed off. In the back of Jakes' mind, he recalled that Father Paulos had either known Henry Curtis, or knew quite a lot about him; so he turned and asked him.

Paulos brightened up at the question. 'There's a good twenty years between us,' he said. 'I first met him when he and his young wife, Mary, were on an exploratory geological mission in West Africa. I regret I'm bound not to reveal the name of the country, for he wrote a story about it called, "The Forgotten Land". It was a true story, but very strange indeed; had it been anybody else I doubt if I would have believed it, but Henry was a gentleman in the finest sense; his word was his bond. He told me that the story was absolutely true, although it was told in an anthropomorphic vein. Our connection was sporadic and fairly fleeting. He was a most likeable person, and a man I admired tremendously. I was a junior missionary based up country, and on rare occasions I was sent into the town, which was also the country's port, I used to call on him for an hour or so. It was one of the few bright lights during those dark days, for the country was saturated in witchcraft and evil; a country enslaved by a minority group who had been armed and landed there about a hundred and forty years before.'

Paulos was obviously deeply moved, but he went on. 'You must forgive me that I cannot tell you much more, but I promised; and, like Henry Curtis, I keep my promises. Anyway, at the mission station we knew there was trouble brewing, and I was sent into town to find out more. I did. There was an uprising in full swing. I was in great fear, for believe me there are few things

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more terrible than blind, murderous mob madness. It's the dangerous mindlessness in it that is so awful to behold; beyond reason, humans stripped of any rational thought; the impact on one's own balance of mind is the most destabilising and terrifying experience I have ever known... Can you imagine that? No, of course you can't; it is one of those experiences which to know you have to see for yourself. Anyway, I went straight to Henry's house, or what had been his house, to find it burnt to the ground, still smouldering. There was nobody there, so after a quick search, it was plain that there were no charred human remains; but that was all I knew, or could find out. Henry Curtis, his wife, Mary, and their two young children, a girl and a boy, were gone, leaving no trace.

'I tell you frankly, I staggered from the rubble that had been their home; I was mad with shock and grief, for I feared they had been taken and subjected to God knows what horrors. There was nothing I could do; no clues, nothing. In my stricken state I held on to the hope that Henry, who must have known about this insurrection, had got his family and himself out of the country. The streets around were empty. It's like that with insurrections; one minute crammed with an ululating mob, blood-crazed, eyes staring emptily, and in a real sense, sightless to sanity and reason; then they'd sweep on, leaving devastation and chaos in their wake. I returned to the mission station, and told my Superior about the insurrection; but I said nothing about Henry Curtis and his family.

'Nearly a year later, shortly before I was due to return to Spain, I received a package from Henry Curtis; it had been quite damaged and torn by the local postal people. The post mark on it was from Tanganyika, as it was known in those days. In it there was a short note from Henry to say that the enclosed story, "The Forgotten Land", would explain all I needed to know, but requesting that I wait at least ten years before attempting to have it published. He never said why, but I think it could only have been to protect some people from whom he may have had help, although except for the vet his story gave no indication of any other friendly contacts.'

In spite of himself, or perhaps due to Pietro's influence, Jakes

found himself caught up in this fascinating story, and he broke in to ask, 'Tell me, Paulos, what sort of man was Henry when you knew him before? You mentioned that he had both a daughter and a son, yet on *The Viking's* register he gave his married daughter, Lucinda, as his only living relative? Did he recognise you on the ship? Lastly, I only knew him as a passenger, but how was Henry Curtis generally viewed by people other than yourself?'

Paulos listened attentively, but at the same time his eyes were following Maitland's careful but steady progress on the cliff face. He gave one of his rare dry laughs. 'Your two main questions are ones that I've heard others ask, and of course both are linked: Henry was a true gentleman in the divided meaning of the word; unique and strong in many ways, sensitive and vulnerable in others; simple yet complex, but with a considerable presence. He sought always for truth in life, and was therefore very much an individual with a mind of his own, a thinker and a man of depth; not really easy to get to know. Broadly speaking, people tended to view him from opposite camps: those who liked and admired him for himself and his qualities, while others of lesser stature were often jealous, even sinking to petty malice behind his back. Is it not so often the case, that those who are honest in their thinking and in the expression of their thoughts, create behind them a trail of yapping curs? There was so much to him, and it can be honestly said that he was a man who never left a vacuum in his path through life. What he was, what he did and what he said were always remembered by those who knew him. As to Lucinda: yes, she was their young daughter.'

'Well,' said Jakes, 'that's quite an obituary; you must have liked and admired him tremendously. Tell me, though, did he not recognise you on *The Viking*?''

'Of course he did, although we had not met again since his time on the West Coast; nor were we in contact beyond that single note and his story. He was the same Henry Curtis, but quieter; shall I say, a man bearing a burden with an air of loneliness, anticipation and hope? I can't put it any clearer. He was a complex man; you'll have to be satisfied with that. Anyway, soon after he got back to England his young son died; after this

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the three of them, himself, his wife Mary and their daughter Lucinda, went back to East Africa, some distance from where Mary's parents had lived and died, and where Mary had grown up. Then, years later, Mary died tragically from a riding accident, and this really broke him up, for they shared a rare and beautiful love. This is why Henry was knocking around the world on *The Viking*, trying to come to terms with his loss and with himself. All this he told me on the ship, just once; he needed to talk, yet it hurt him terribly to do so. I think he found my presence hard to cope with, for I was the sole reminder of the time when they were all together. He never said so; he was not that sort of man; but I felt it.'

Paulos had never let his eyes stray for long from the cliff face and Maitland, whom he saw was tiring. His movements were slower and his pauses longer. Saying nothing to Jakes and the children, Paulos rose to his feet and made his way closer to the cliff.

Slowly, carefully, foot by foot, Maitland steadily made his way upwards, but at a broken slant to follow the easiest route. It was plain to Paulos that Maitland was an accomplished climber who had mapped his route well, so with Jakes and the children standing next to him, Paulos contented himself with watching.

Sometimes Maitland found the route was easier, and made fairly good progress; but on the whole it was an appallingly difficult climb, and would have been so, even with climbing gear. Now, high above the beach, his heart sank as he viewed at first hand the immensity of the task that he had so forcibly undertaken.

An hour passed, and Maitland's muscles were beginning to shake under the strain. With cramp threatening, he felt the fringe of panic claw at his nerves. Was it courage, or bravado and the wish to prove himself that had made him discount his age so rashly? Paulos had been right in that he was lightly built and far younger. So ran his thoughts; but for most of his life he had been an adventurer, and had become used to pitting himself against odds that would daunt most men. To be remembered as he grew older, he had sometimes been foolishly reckless, pushing himself beyond the bounds of normal adventuring. However, whatever

his faults, Maitland never lacked determination and courage. Now he climbed on, turning aside the intrusive barbs of fear, although every muscle and sinew screamed in protest at the outrageous calls being made on them. His progress was slower, with longer rests to stretch his cramping limbs; but exhaustion had to be thrust ruthlessly aside, regardless of his body's clamouring demands.

Then his feet slipped from a narrow ledge along which he was slowly working his way. In that moment his full weight fell on his hands and fingers, hooked into a narrow crevice, with a sudden tearing strain as his body swung loosely in space, buffeted by the gusting wind. In those few moments his exhaustion was so great that he wondered if he could hold on, and might not fall, down onto a line of jagged rocks far below, reaching out to sea. There'd be a brief moment of agony as his body was ripped, torn and smashed, but then rest and blessed peace.

But at that critical moment, in his mind's eye Pietro stood before him. He smiled a golden smile, and then reached out and touched his forehead. With that touch, strength flooded through Maitland's body; his despairing thoughts fell away, and with a cool head he felt around with his feet, to find again the tiny ledge from which his feet had slipped. The vision of Pietro, real or a figment of his overwrought imagination, was no longer with him; but after this he was able to work his way along, until at last the narrow ledge under his toes broadened out, and he could relieve his arms, hands and fingers from most of the frightful strain. A few more yards, and he was past one of the worst climbing experiences in his life. At the same time he glimpsed Paulos far below him, standing back on the beach, his face pale with concern; or so it seemed, for Maitland dare not spare another downward glance.

Shortly after, Maitland was faced with the final hundred feet or so; a comparatively easy task had he been fresh, since at this point the cliff not only inclined slightly inwards towards the bulking landmass behind, but was also broken and more prolific in hand and footholds.

But Maitland's flood of strength was drained; again he had only heart and spirit to support his self-imposed task, and again he

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was physically and mentally exhausted, strained and shaking with fatigue. This climb had forced him to accept his advancing years, and with it his physical limitations; only his vivid vision of Pietro had kept him going after his feet had slipped from the thin ledge. Slowly and painfully he hauled his wracked and tortured body upwards over the rounded slope, until at last his hands slid over the cliff's edge. With a final convulsive effort he squirmed his way onto the verge, to lie drained on the rough, wind-blown grass, his legs hanging slackly over the void below.

For a while Maitland just lay there, the wind tugging at his tattered trouser legs and torn shirt, gasping for precious air with a hoarse and rasping sound, his chest heaving violently under the strain: he was too old for this sort of climb, his super-fit body a quivering mass of overstrained and cramping muscles.

Broken and limp, his breathing eased slowly as the minutes ticked by until, although too dizzy and uncertain to stand, he turned and elbowed his way forward until his legs were on the grass; then, on hands and knees, he crawled forward and peered over the edge of the cliff, but his view was partially blocked by the bulging rock face he had just climbed with so much effort, and he could see only the breaking waves and a third of the beach, catching now and then a glimpse of his fellow castaways as they gathered driftwood.

It had been Maitland's intention to wave Paulos back, to shout at him not to try the cliff which, in spite of the priest's comparative youth, he felt would be beyond his skill and endurance. Maitland stumbled to his feet, and shuffled south along the rim of the cliff until he was clear of the bulge and could see the small group below. Then he spotted Paulos about a third of the way up the cliff face; climbing, and going well; but the hardest section of the climb was ahead of him, a short stretch where the cliff's face was vertical and almost smooth, the same that so nearly cost Maitland his life when his feet had slipped from the narrow ledge.

He shouted, but it was useless, for the upward rush of wind hurled back his feeble efforts as if they were no more than fluff in a gale, added to which the heavy crash and roar of the sea far below flowed up the slope of the cliff, creating an additional and

effective barrier to any but the most piercing of sounds. He very quickly realised that his efforts were wasted, even had he the full power of his lungs. But as he sank onto his stomach, his head and shoulders over the cliff's edge, he could at least see much of what went on below, and on the cliff side. He watched as Paulos neatly circumnavigated the difficult section of the climb by going above and over. Maitland wondered why he had not seen that route; but he felt no jealousy, only admiration.

Jakes was walking around with Pietro and Ruth, gathering wood for their fire; even from his distance he could see that the three of them were closely linked, creating a oneness in manner, thought and spirit. He could not of course hear what they were saying; but he watched when Jakes stopped, then knelt while Pietro placed both hands over his burnt face and blinded eyes.

Then a wonderful thing happened, born perhaps from his shattered strength and fallen resistance. For a while, free of the shackles of his body, Maitland heard with his inner ear, his extended mind, every word and inflection that passed between Pietro and Jakes. Pietro pulled back on Jakes' hand, and they both stopped. Before Jakes could ask if there was anything wrong, Pietro spoke. 'The burns on your face are very painful; if you'll let me, I can help you with these; but not your sight, for this is not allowed. You're very tall; if you'll bend a little and let me place my hands on your face, the pain at least will go.'

Jakes remembered James Vickery's words to him while he lay dying on his burning bridge; but since then he too had come to feel that there was indeed something quite unique about Pietro, something not of this world. Since the death of his friend, and in spite of the terrible pain from his burns, he had come to know a calm and peace in this child's presence. Jakes did not hesitate; stooping was too slight; he dropped to his knees in front of the boy. Two cool young hands were placed gently but firmly over the awful burns and unhealed scars on his face. In that moment Jakes knew relief. The pain was drawn away, and he felt the tissue of his skin easing and clearing. After which Pietro withdrew his hands.

A moment later Ruth ran up to them, and before Jakes could speak to thank Pietro, she let out a cry of joy. 'Oh, Mr Jakes,

you're better, and even more handsome than before!' And without warning, she ran up to him as he knelt on the sand, threw her arms about his neck and gave him the warmest kiss of pure, innocent love that Jakes had ever had. He could not speak; the tears were running down his cheeks from his blind eyes, yet he felt no embarrassment, and gave Ruth a hug and a kiss in return, before getting to his feet again.

Jakes was uplifted beyond anything he had ever known, his mind in a turmoil. He reached out to where he knew Pietro was standing, and took his hands in both of his, large and sea-hardened as they were. He did not feel he was with a boy of twelve years of age, but of somebody both young and yet old.

'How can I thank you. Who are you?' he asked, but then he fell silent, not knowing what else to say.

Pietro laughed, a wonderfully light and embracing laugh, a laugh of innocence, but innocence grown wise. 'Think of me as a messenger,' he said. 'Come, we should collect more wood; Ruth has a pile over there; together we can double that.'

Jakes' stroke of blindness no longer seemed to trouble him while he was in Pietro's company, nor with Ruth, for their observant guidance was so easy and natural, that he found himself laughing with them both as his age fell away in their company. Together they collected more wood, and with a heavily loaded Jakes staggered back to their camp.

The words and feelings faded from Maitland's mind; now all he saw, but could not hear, were the three of them carrying wood for their fire, then making their way towards where they had made camp. Oddly, he felt that nothing was out of place; nor did he feel any surprise at what he had seen and how he had heard; indeed he felt relieved and pleased for Jakes, and privileged at being drawn in as a foreign party to such an intimate experience. It was all very new to him, but a newness that he welcomed. The exhaustion he suffered after his climb had been so extreme, his burnout so absolute, that Maitland knew there could be no quick recovery, and that he would never again be the man he thought he was.

At the same time he wondered if his imaginary powers were running wild when, without warning, an intruding scene leapt into his mind, of Paulos making his way inland at 'a strong and

effortless lope'. Yet Paulos was now their only hope! Then the vision flickered past and was gone, and he leant further over the cliff edge to see where Paulos had reached; but the cliff bulged from where he lay, and there was no sight of the climber. Maitland knew he could not have fallen, for there would have been frantic reactions from Jakes and the children.

In his spent state and feeling useless, Maitland's thoughts fell back into a trough of depression. It must have been plain to those below that his ineffective climb had been a complete waste of time and strength. Now he could never be the means of providing any needed help or comfort to those on the beach. So near, and yet so far! Instead he must watch as they slowly starved to death before his eyes. In his frustration and anguish he had quite forgotten that it would be he who would be the first to die of thirst and exposure; exposure from the cold wind's wavering song, its high-pitched threnody as day and night it sung, hummed and wailed about the higher levels of the cliff.

So his tired thoughts wandered at random, separated from his battered body in its somnolent state, drifting almost lightly in a world of dreams, or reality. He felt a wonderful sense of comfort and security, of predestination which had loosely bound them all, a state that had been with them from their beginnings, especially after they had boarded *The Viking*, from which the destinies of each and every one of them had twined to form a graceful frame; yet in it there was freedom. The sensation was pleasant, and Maitland let it wash comfortably through his mind.

Then again he felt Pietro's presence, faint and intangible. But still greater was the looming tragedy of the burning ship; the cruel loss of those brave lives; the long savagery of the cyclonic storm with the gigantic power of the elements, the angry sea and gales. Then everything fell back, swallowed in the vastness of time and space, leaving these images as far and distant scenes in a play. Soon the strain was too much, and Maitland's head drooped slowly onto the rough grass verge, caught mercifully in a black sleep of unconsciousness.

Through a dense inner fog, he heard a distant cry of distress; but it was far off, muffled as through a thick and stifling blanket. The cry came again, and this time he recognised Paulos's voice.

Those Who Dare

With an immense effort of will he shook off his suffocating burden of exhaustion; but for a while he could not disentangle himself from the visions that had passed through his mind before the curtain of darkness had closed in on him. He pulled himself to the edge and looked over: thirty – no, less – only twenty feet below him was Paulos, clinging to a small outcrop of rock with his right hand, feet firmly placed and carrying most of his weight. But Maitland noticed that his left arm hung limply by his side at a peculiarly twisted angle; he could not be sure at that distance, but the distortion indicated either a break between the elbow and the shoulder, or a dislocation.

Under normal conditions the twenty feet that separated them would have been child's play to a climber of Paulos's youth and ability; but in his crippled circumstances, it was plainly beyond him to handle alone. He could move neither forwards nor backwards without the use of both arms and hands. His present position was tenable for a short time, but to have attempted to climb would have brought about a fall to his death.

During a lull under the broken howl of the wind, Maitland was able to slip in a brief call. 'Hang on, I'm coming!'

Paulos nodded mutely, his face wan and strained in the clouded light.

Cautiously lowering his body over the cliff's edge, Maitland started his downward climb. His spirit was willing, but his stamina was broken, even though he had been a good hour ahead of Paulos; now his heart pounded from even the lightest exertion, and there was a dull, heavy throbbing in his head, interjected with agonising spasms, which tore across his brain like miniature bolts of jagged lightning, threatening to black him out in a screaming haze of pain. At such times, which grew more frequent as he slowly and unsteadily descended, he forced himself to keep quite still, willing his mind to relax so that he might not lose consciousness under its keen edge of agony.

In this laborious fashion, Maitland made his way down towards where Paulos stood and clung, until at last his feet found a fairly wide ledge directly above, and on a vertical line over Paulos's outstretched body.

'My God, Maitland!' he cried, 'but you're crazy to climb down

here! You'll never make it back to the top again.' Paulos, in spite of his own painful and precarious predicament, was aghast at Maitland's obvious weakness and deathly appearance. His face was ashen and deeply etched, and from his slow movements and dulled eyes it was plain that he could hardly hope to hold on much longer, much less to give any help in his condition.

Yet by sheer determination and inner strength, Maitland not only hung on, but was also very much aware of Paulos's situation. 'Your arm,' he gasped, 'how bad is it?'

'Dislocated at the shoulder... It happened just back there. I slipped and my weight was thrown on my left arm at an awkward angle. But why bother? The situation's impossible in your condition,' Paulos added hopelessly. 'I can't move, and I doubt if you can get back to the top again.'

'Thank God it's a dislocation and not a break,' replied Maitland cryptically, apparently impervious to Paulos's tone of despair. 'Listen, you're right; I can't make it back again, and even if I could I'd only be a useless burden to you. I'm finished, really finished, and therefore expendable.'

In spite of his own recent despair, Paulos was horrified at Maitland's calm tone of finality, and was about to interrupt when Maitland cut in. 'Hear me out, please.' His voice was scarcely audible above his strained breathing and the wild wailing from the wind. 'On the beach below us are three people whose ongoing lives are entirely dependent on our success or failure; if we stay where we are, then nothing will have been achieved. Our deaths will be quicker; before this night is out we'll be too chilled and weak in our exposed positions to hold on; you know this. On the beach, Jakes, Pietro and Ruth face a much slower death from exposure and hunger; from the cold and damp and the availability of driftwood; perhaps two weeks. Their hard ration biscuits will give them up to twelve days, but they're only for emergencies to sustain life. However long, theirs would be a lingering death, not such as I want to carry on my conscience.'

Maitland was silent as another surge of excruciating pain whipped across his forehead, worse than before, pushing him back against the cliff: a part return for the effort he had given to his logical and persuasive words.

Paulos watched in growing amazement as Maitland again fought his silent battle, and could not help but be deeply impressed by his companion's tenacity of purpose and invincible courage.

At length the agony passed, leaving Maitland shaken and that bit frailer. 'I'm sorry,' he managed to murmur audibly in staggered speech, through lips that barely moved, forcing Paulos to strain intently to catch his words. 'Your position isn't hopeless; there's a way out for you. A bit chancy, I grant you, but the only one we have. Could you make it to the top if your shoulder was back in place? It'd be badly strained and painful, and you'd have to be careful for a while not to dislocate it again; so could you make it – and then go inland for help?'

'Yes, I'm sure I could,' Paulos replied, spurred by Maitland's example, but speaking with more confidence than his prudence dictated. 'The way up is easy enough; the only real snag would be in getting onto the ledge on which you're standing. In fact, if I were there I could probably make it even as I am now.'

'Probably,' said Maitland dryly, 'but I can't get you onto this ledge. However, if you play your part with me, I'm sure we can get you up to the top of this cliff; after which you'd have to travel inland with all speed; but bear in mind that you'd have to run with some jarring pain from your damaged shoulder. Argentina's narrow at this southern latitude, so you'd probably come across a settlement of some sort within ten or fifteen miles of this coast.'

'But time is short, so listen carefully: I want you to use your fingertips on the rock face to work your left arm up to me, high as you can; I'll then grip your wrist, and when I say "Go", you must kick off into space; let go completely, so that your weight will fall on your dislocated shoulder. My position is good with strong handholds, so don't worry about my letting go, or that I'll be torn off this ledge.'

'Come on,' Maitland persisted relentlessly, after a short pause that was pregnant with Paulos's horror at the whole idea. 'I know it'll be damn painful; you might even black out for a few seconds. There's no other way, and I'm sure we have a better than even chance of your shoulder being pulled into place. There's no alternative; it's this way, or fall and die brutally on the sharp crags below. Come – it's surely worth a try?'

At first Paulos could not be drawn to reason. A servant to fear and a lurid imagination, his thoughts ran rife as they sped ahead: the agony, Maitland losing his grip, followed by the bloody results of his fall onto the cruel rocks far below; his mind flickered without restraint over the gory details of his torn and helpless body. Then, uncharacteristically, faced with the vivid pictures drawn in his mind, and the raw terror that cruelly gripped him, he cursed Maitland for his cold, callous and soulless heart. The words poured out, first in Spanish and then in English; the veneer of his priesthood temporarily slipping from him with astonishing ease.

Nine: Trials of Courage

Maitland remained silent; there was no point in his trying to break into this hysterical tirade. He was getting to know Paulos, and felt sure the priest would soon see that there was no other possible course of action, none at least with any chance of him being able to move from his present position, or to be able to get help for those remaining on the beach below. To Maitland it was simply a case of accepting the pain and taking the risk, or of a bloody and barren death with nothing gained. Besides, he was tired, far more than he would normally have cared to admit, so he used Paulos's time spent in venting his shocked and outraged feelings, to conserve his own dwindling energies as far he could for the trial that he knew lay ahead.

Eventually Paulos calmed down. He was neither a fool nor a coward, so while Maitland's own strength of mind and purpose was to his companion as inexorable as the tides that rise and fall, his own calm steadiness gradually communicated itself to Paulos's overwrought imagination. He fell silent as his ungoverned emotions died back, leaving him ashamed and ill at ease. Maitland said nothing, and for a short while the wild wind sang its lonely and dolorous song around the two men, varying its pitch as it sought out nooks and crannies in the rock face. At length Paulos spoke more quietly, apologising profusely for his rough language and loss of control.

Seeing this change, Maitland roused himself. He looked, if possible, even sicker than before; yet at the same time there was something about him, a fineness and eminence which was intensely magnetic and compelling, lifting Paulos's spirit above his fear of placing his life in the hands of a physically worn-out man.

Paulos looked up at the man above him before he finally spoke and committed himself. He had to be sure; but there was no trace

of recrimination in the tired eyes that met his, only a huge patience and understanding; both qualities out of keeping with the man he thought he had known on *The Viking*. To Paulos this was a new Maitland; and while their urgent circumstances left little time for reflection, yet he could not help but appreciate and grasp at the radiating qualities that shone from him, stilling his fears and capturing his mind in strands of silk. This was a moment he would never forget, however he might later translate the wonder to his own satisfaction. Then, on the spur of the moment he said, 'You're right,' followed more hesitantly by, 'I'm sorry. I'll see if I can work my arm up the rock.'

And that was it; the moment of decision in just a few words. If Maitland felt any surprise or satisfaction at Paulos's volte-face, then he never showed it beyond a brief word of acquiescence, along with a strained but warm smile through thinned and whitened lips.

In as few words as his waning vitality would allow, Maitland set himself to imbue Paulos with his own strength during his painful endeavour. The seconds passed slowly to Paulos who, now that he had taken the plunge, was filled with an overriding determination to vindicate himself, to see this hazardous experiment through to the end, no matter what the final cost. As he used his fingers to drag his arm up the cliff, his face reflected the intensely painful strain in glistening sweat-streaked rivulets that sprang from his greying skin. Maitland meanwhile watched his every move, giving guidance and encouragement when his efforts appeared to falter.

But at last it was done, and Maitland, crouching low on his broad ledge, his right hand gripped firmly on to a strong and easily held projection, caught hold of Paulos's left wrist in a tight grip. For a moment their faces were close; Maitland's wan and lined, with a trace of colour flowing thinly beneath the surface, reflecting the tension of the moment, and behind it the spur of his determination and indomitable courage. Paulos's features were strained, streaked with drying sweat and rock dust, but beneath this mask it was plainly evident that he had dug deep, tapping into inner reserves of vitality and strength of purpose.

The comparison between them was strangely marked, for

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together they reflected a diverse medley of feelings and thoughts, yet which linked to a common purpose: fear and panic, mental strife, self-analysis and acceptance; as against destiny and purpose, determination, courage and attainment. But in those moments of truth, neither man could wholly and truly see within himself, nor fully comprehend the potentials or motivations that lay behind his actions. Each in his own way was carving a road of his own, gauged only in extent by the range of his inner vision and perception.

‘Don’t worry, Paulos; you’ll come out of this all right, and you’ll make it inland for help.’ Maitland’s voice was soft and heavy with fatigue, but his grip on Paulos’s wrist was like a steel band in its reassurance.

‘And what about you? Can you make it back to the cliff top?’ gasped Paulos, in real concern.

‘Don’t fret over me; I’ll manage. You have the important task ahead to get help and rescue to our three friends below.’

After this, Maitland gave Paulos no time in which to think, lest his own waning strength be drained too far to hold a writhing body swinging in mid air. He could feel these reserves dwindling as every wasted moment flitted by. ‘Go now, Paulos. Kick off!’ Maitland rapped, his voice cracking like a whiplash in its commanding urgency.

For a split second Paulos hesitated, a fleeting glimpse of fear crossing his face; but his subordination to Maitland in the crisis was complete, and he slipped his feet off the ledge on which he had been standing.

In spite of Paulos’s determination not to cry out, he could not help himself. The red agony from the sudden jerk on his disjointed shoulder as his full weight swung on it was too much for him, and in his brief but tortured haze he was conscious of his own piercing scream echoing along the cliff’s grooved face, momentarily topping the wail of the high wind. It was too much.

‘Let me go!’ he cried. Let me go!’ And with his calls of distress, Paulos’s feet were scrabbling wildly to regain their foothold; but at the full stretch of both men, his body was now hanging too low, while the agony from his disjointed shoulder made any control over his muscles erratic and ineffective.

But Maitland would not let go. He was totally committed to this only possible course of action, even though he knew he was gripping his own death. His own reserves of life and strength were draining away with the speed of a bursting dam; but his sights were set on the task before him, and nothing, nothing would now break this inflexible determination. Grimly, almost fiercely, he thought of his hands as two immensely strong steel bands, separate from himself; indeed his grips were tremendous, powered by all the tenacity and strength of will of a man who knew this to be his last act, his only chance and his final exit. A name flashed through his mind. '*Pietro!*' he called. Meanwhile his body was stretched out and away from the cliff, until much of his own weight was added to his hands and arms, his left holding on to Paulos who, maddened by pain, was struggling frantically.

It could not last, not even had he been younger, unworn and in the peak of condition; the strain was terrible, worsened by the buffeting wind that snatched at them as they held and hung there. It seemed an age, but in fact it was no more than a few seconds. Maitland was outworn, and could only cling blindly to Paulos with one hand and the jutting spur of rock behind him with the other, his will governed to fulfil this final task.

Then his senses clouded, while jagged pains seared blindingly across his forehead; he gasped in agony, but held on, giving all he had of his rapidly dwindling strength, barely conscious now of Paulos's struggles in his set will to hold on until relieved of his burden.

In fact the wild experiment worked: Paulos's shoulder, while yet strained and intensely painful, suddenly slipped into place and was no longer distorted and under an unnatural tension. He recovered his senses and looked up: already Maitland's eyes were beginning to glaze, consciousness was leaving him, and Paulos saw immediately that in a very few seconds his grip would slacken. Stilling his struggles, Paulos reached up for the cliff with his right hand.

It was none too soon, for just as Paulos found his original hold on the rock face, and as he slid his feet back onto the narrow ledge on which he had stood before, Maitland's grip on his left wrist relaxed completely, releasing it so that Paulos's arm fell to his side.

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For a while there was nothing he could do; his hold on the rock face was tenuous, his senses still recovering from the fear, pain and shock of what he had just been through. Consequently, Paulos was unable to adjust his mind to the tumbling horror, and was only dimly aware of Maitland's falling body as a dark shadow that swept briefly over his head.

Maitland fell: at first unimpeded, almost graceful in his curve through the air. Then his poor, worn-out body struck a promontory, slid off it, broken and torn as it fell, bounding from one crag to another. For a while, far down, it sagged over a jutting spur of rock directly above the line of the cliff as it extended out into the sea. Paulos helplessly watched the final act, his own dilemma forgotten. There, indecisively, limp and lifeless, Maitland's body hung for a few moments, before toppling towards the south; until at last, clear and free of any further obstructions, including the jagged barrier between the beaches, it finally crunched heavily onto the shingle below, bleeding, crushed and battered.

Perhaps he died before he fell, or perhaps the last flickers of life had been dashed from him as his broken body plunged down to the beach far below. But whether he died before or later is, in the light of events, almost immaterial: Maitland died a true and courageous man. He died with a balanced mind, and with his feet well on the road to truth and a greater reality. Perhaps it was by chance that his body lay sprawled on the beach adjacent to the south of the three remaining castaways.

From the beach below it was difficult to see clearly to the top of the cliff, for the cloud cover had fallen, and the dark swirling wisps obscured their view; neither could they hear above the mournful song of the wind high up the cliff. Yet somehow Pietro knew what had happened, about Maitland's grim struggle to save them all. He said little to Jakes, but something of the boy's inner sight communicated itself to his blind and sensitive friend.

Consequently, the horror of Maitland's fall on the far side of their natural barrier of jagged rock, the final shattering of his body as it struck the beach with only a muted crunch of scattered pebbles, barely audible above the crash of crumpling waves and the hiss of swirling water, did not come as such a shock to Jakes as

it would have done had he not had Pietro with him. In fact, even as Maitland's body began to fall over Paulos's head, Pietro had cried out to Jakes, who had immediately pulled Ruth towards him, clasping her firmly and pressing her face against his side.

As Jakes released Ruth, Pietro broke their brief silence. 'He's going soon.' And then, to emphasise what he had said, he continued, 'Mr Maitland was dying even before he fell.'

Jakes felt uncomfortable about leaving Maitland's body lying on a deserted beach; but at the same time he realised the pointlessness in attempting to climb over a jagged rocky barrier... A blind man with two children over an outcrop that had already been declared by both Maitland and Paulos as sharp and jagged, too difficult to climb without suitable equipment; and to what purpose anyway? On both flanks of their beach the cliff ran out for some distance into the sea. What could they do, even if they could reach Maitland, dead, or still just alive? Scrabble in the shingle to make a temporary grave for his body, wasting their precious energy while living on the ship's biscuits? And if he was just alive? Impossible after such a terrible fall! Then there was Ruth. No, it was out of the question!

As Jakes' mind was juggling over his dilemma, Pietro's voice cut in. 'I think you're right, Mr Jakes. To try and reach his body – even if he is just alive – would be pointless, even harmful. He gave his life for us, and maybe his silence now is a part of it; besides, he's being cared for.'

While Jakes was becoming accustomed to Pietro's extraordinary powers of inner perception, he was taken aback at his thoughts being read so easily and with such uncanny accuracy; even Pietro's wording was far above that of a boy of twelve; concluding with, 'he's being cared for'! And Jakes wondered...

'Well, I suppose we'd better collect more wood for the fire; I don't know how much there is on this beach, but we must be careful not to run ourselves short. We have about eleven days on ship's emergency ration biscuits, and just possibly eleven more days on this beach; so unless there's stacks of wood around we're better to keep what there is for the nights, which are chilly here. I think Ruth should be in charge of our fire, and of course the wood supply and rationing.'

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Both Pietro and Ruth were delighted with this practical proposal, but Jakes felt slightly ill at ease with himself. He had little experience of dealing with children in his life, although they always appeared to be drawn to him; and he had certainly never known anyone, child or adult, like Pietro. He was a deeply religious man with a strong and simple faith, but while one part of him felt out of his depth with Pietro, another felt a greater sense of ease, trust and peace of mind than he had ever known in his life. Jakes shelved the problem, and set himself to living on a day-to-day basis on the beach while they waited for help.

Far up the cliff's precipitous face, Paulos had just reached the summit. His left arm was weak and of little practical use to him, but at least his shoulder was back in place and the pain bearable. He turned to peer down at the beach far below, but a low swirling mist of fine rain now obscured his vision, quite apart from the final bulge of the cliff, which in any case made it impossible to see far inside the line of driven waves. A great loneliness swept over him, and his heart turned cold at the thought of being alone with Maitland's body lying crushed and broken hundreds of feet below. He had given his life so that he, Paulos, might travel swiftly inland for help. He realised then just how much he had depended on this man, how great had been his influence on him since they had battled through the sea, so tired that they had in effect been almost washed ashore.

Paulos felt cold, wet and miserable as the weather drew its dense blanket between himself and his three remaining companions on the beach; he had no inclination to widen the gap by going inland for help – if there was any to be had in this wild and empty part of the world. The temptation to just stay where he was, or even to throw himself over the edge so that his body might lie with Maitland's was, in his depression, well-nigh overwhelming; indeed, for a while he let his weary body slump to the ground, allowing his weakness to wash over him, while soaking up the rain and misery which seemed to fill his whole horizon.

Slowly the futility of his inaction grew within him, spurred by the soaking rain and chill wind; but most of all by Maitland's reliance on him to seek for help at any cost: for this he had

sacrificed his life. After a few minutes he stumbled to his feet, looked fruitlessly again over the cliff's edge, then turned and trotted stiffly inland. He wished he had a firm sling to bind his left arm to his body, but the best he could manage was to thrust his hand and forearm into his shirt front; however, he soon found that even this little support spoilt his balance, so let his arm swing freely in rhythm with his balance and stride.

At first the coarse grassland before him fell away in a gentle undulating slope, and Paulos made good speed with the wind at his back, his stiff limbs flexing more easily to the exercise, while a glow of warmth began to tingle through his body. But the air was cold, his clothing light, so these pleasant sensations were of a transitory nature, maintained only as long as he kept moving. Had he been dry and fresh, and without a throbbing pain in his left shoulder from the recent dislocation, followed by a brutal cure, Paulos knew that he would have been capable of covering many miles, for he was tough and lightly built.

In fact, behind Paulos in particular lay an almost ceaseless strain and tension during the past seventy-two hours; indeed the vast and turbulent seas, the howling gale-force winds, and the anxiety of the night before, had given none of them much chance for rest on the ship. But these were a mere prelude to the hardships and stress following the shipwreck of *The Viking*; the fear of fire and being suffocated and burnt in the cold sea; the great waves and the draining chill while swimming to the beach; the death and burial of Curtis in a grave of shingle; followed by the climb up the almost sheer cliff, and the near-fatal slip that had pulled his shoulder out of joint; then came the tearing strain, emotional and physical, of what he had to accomplish under Maitland's undeviating and coolly spoken guidance. Finally, how keenly aware he was of Maitland's supreme sacrifice, and how calmly and without question he had accepted burning out the dying embers of his strength so that he, Paulos, could be given the chance to press forward for help!

All these closely following events had taken a frightful toll on Paulos's vitality, and a shattering devastation to his balance of mind, which now lay in turmoil; so while he was physically tougher than most, and used to the easy rhythm of running long

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distances, he now ran like an automaton, his mind spinning under its accumulated burdens, so foreign to the life he had known and lived. Mostly he thought of Maitland, of the greatness and strength in the man, and of how set and jaded he was by comparison.

Slowly, emerging from the dark shadows in his mind, there stepped the man that he had been; a man unaware of his true self, one who avoided close public scrutiny, hiding behind the dogma and security of his Church, never venturing deeply into the minds and troubles of those in his spiritual care.

Still he ran on, punishing himself, although his body clamoured for rest, and his pace was scarcely better than a feeble trot. He knew he was not yet beaten, not physically, and that his hardened body should endure for some hours – if only his mind and senses were not so stunned and bemused!

Instinctively, almost, he kept the wind at his back, and the watery glow of the afternoon sun to his right. The sharp pain in his left shoulder had eased with the warmth of his body. But not his mind, for all the time his thoughts raged ceaselessly about, seeking here and there for some answer to a host of related riddles that plagued his stricken soul; logical, but obscure and intangible questions that needled and smote at him continuously – such as the dubious measure of his worth in the role which he had chosen, to live and work as a priest. Had his motive been evasion from being unsure and insecure, or was he just a misfit? These and other questions imperiously demanded attention from his muddled and weary mind.

Paulos had lost any sense of time. As his legs erratically pounded the miles away from beneath his feet, and the weariness of his body took ever greater precedence, his inner thoughts began to take on a quieter and more comforting rhythm of their own. Even so he was aware of the pain and turmoil that lay in wait, and a great fear arose in his mind that he could only evade their sharper barbs as long as he kept running; so leaving a residue of determination that he dare not stop, but must keep fleeing from these disturbing and pursuing thoughts, must dull his mind in the pain of stiff and exhausted muscles as they forced his body on and on.

He had long since left the gently falling slope from the brow of the cliff. Under his feet the rough grass remained much the

same, save that now the land before him rolled unevenly, with pockets of scrub and scattered hillocks of weathered rock. It was a bleak and deserted landscape, so weathered by wind and rain that the rounded hillocks were often bare of soil, clothed in lichens of varying colours that gleamed in the rain that was now falling.

In Paulos's tangled mind, he felt that at some stage in his life he had taken a wrong turning, had failed. Perhaps it was in his role as a missionary priest, in which he may have adhered too closely to petty rulings, avoiding the real needs of his flock; or perhaps on the ship, the beach – or the cliff? Something had happened, something which his limited background and priestly life had combined to block and trap his inner sight. He cursed the gift of free will that had placed so cruel a burden of responsibility on his shoulders, laying the door open to errors in his thoughts and actions, enticing him on to the slippery slope of self-security, when he should have been leading his flock up a narrow and stony path. Yet, as in a fog far, far away, he felt the presence of enlightenment knocking at the door of his mind, seeking entrance with love and knowledge; but he could not fully recognise its form, so he ran from it, dulling its gentle persistence in the faulty rhythm of his pounding feet.

Two hours, nearly three, passed slowly by; but Paulos, barely conscious of the passage of time, was more aware that the rain had lessened to little more than a fine drizzle, sometimes blown flat in the fluctuations of a diminishing offshore gale, but thrown hither and thither in the more sheltered dells and valleys, stinging his face. He had no idea how far he had run, nor for how long. The sun's low level over the hills told him that the afternoon was far advanced: an hour or so and he would be alone and in the dark, when there would be no chance of running any further. The land was already becoming more hilly and uneven to his feet, and over this rougher terrain, moonlight or no, it would be impossible to maintain his direction, and not to run in circles.

Paulos was perilously close to the absolute end of his strength and endurance; only the insistent rhythmic pattern beating in his brain had kept his legs pounding on. This mental rhythm was all that remained between him and collapse – first left, then right, left, right: it was vital to keep in time. But there were limits

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beyond which he could not reach, and the steady thud of his feet had long since become broken and stumbling, out of tune with the rhythmic drumming in his mind. He fell more often, and on one occasion could only crawl from sheer exhaustion; but the madness in him still held to the insistent pattern in his brain, driving him to his feet to lumber on. Then again he fell, and again, though more heavily each time, striving to force his rebellious limbs, willing them to follow the drifting pattern in his mind.

Then Paulos grew truly mad, as with the final flickering from a candle: mad with fear of the darkness which, with the sinking sun, lay so close; mad with fear of his own self and pursuing thoughts which, even through his terrible exhaustion, were ever ready to pound at him should he dare to stop; mad with anger at his own enfeebled limbs and bodily limitations. Hanging before him was the vision of how Maitland had driven himself to the limit, and how he dare not do less; so, with the fury of desperation and the fear of failure hanging over him, Paulos gathered his remaining strength into a hard, tight knot of resolution, looked ahead at the long hill that stretched upwards and away, and stumbled grimly on, oblivious to all else, save for his determination to force his will upon his weakened frame.

But such zeal was not without its price; for when, some twenty minutes later, Paulos reached the summit, he presented a wild and terrifying spectacle. His lower lip was lacerated and chewed from unconsciously seeking to spur away the pain in his limbs; while the blood, staining the soaking damp of his shirt, had flecked his lower jaw, and spattered his hands and wrists from his feeble attempts to brush away the tiredness and clammy sweat. But the price was well paid, for around the floor of the long sloping valley before him nestled a tiny hamlet, consisting of some brightly roofed and windowed stone-built houses. Nearest to him was one that was slightly larger, along with some small outbuildings; while away on the opposite hill's higher slopes, just discernible through the weak evening light and the driving misty rain, a flock of sheep bore further witness to the presence of human life.

For a few moments Paulos could only stand and stare, his

body drooping in exhaustion. Scarcely a flicker of emotion stirred him, and certainly no hint of any showed in his drawn, bloody and sweat-streaked features and red-rimmed eyes. Relief touched him, though his legs shook like the wavering foundations to a building in an earthquake. He was so utterly spent that the sight before his eyes, the goal for which he had striven so hard, was accepted as barely more than a simple fact; there was no energy to spare for elation, and none for surprise.

Reeling slightly, Paulos staggered down the hill. His brief spell of fanatical resolution had burnt away; even now, when the going was easier, his movements were stiff and clumsy, and he paused and fell often. Now, with help so close at hand, his mouth felt as dry as burnt tinder, and he became desperately aware of a clamouring thirst.

At the bottom of the hill, Paulos came upon a very small stream: the first water he had seen since leaving the beach. He dropped to the ground, and let his head sink until the cold water lapped at his face, and drank until he could drink no more. Yet still he felt dehydrated. He washed away most of the sweat and grime and some of the blood; worn to the point of collapse, yet insatiably revelling in these cool waters of life, found here in this wonderfully clear and dappled rivulet, even though it was little more than a seasonal dribble.

A short while later, refreshed but as yet unobserved, he pushed himself heavily to his feet, splashed through the water and headed towards the nearest and largest house, barely three hundred metres from the stream. Paulos was encouraged by a thin wisp of smoke rising from the chimney, and from this small sign that he would be given the warmth, rest and help he so desperately needed.

For the first time in his life he felt the real meaning of age as he tottered weakly down the gentle slope, his legs scarcely his own, but rather as two rubbery extensions moving clumsily of their own volition and will. His chest was aflame from hours of violently drawing in the raw, damp air, and from the clammy fingers of pneumonia which, even now, were reaching deeply into his lungs, bringing on a fever that brought two high spots of colour to his cheeks, and watery blinds over the brown windows

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of his eyes. Paulos staggered towards the house, now barely aware of anything about him, only the warm light that drew him on, glowing redly through faded orange curtains from the downstairs windows.

He wondered at his rapidly failing strength, and whether he would ever reach the haven that floated before his misting eyes; a haven of warmth and rest that enticed him on, slowly, ever so slowly; yet always it seemed to drift away from him, one pace back for every two he took forwards.

Suddenly the door of the house was flung open by a sturdily built man who, for a moment, stared at Paulos, now barely fifty metres away and clinging weakly to a sapling that scarcely supported his weight. Then Paulos saw the man leave the house and stride towards him, though his grim visage seemed to float on air and walk in space, coming not one step the closer.

Paulos wondered at this mystery. Perhaps the man had not seen him? Or perhaps he had already passed through the gates of death? Perhaps... But he wondered no more, as his eyes glazed over and he slid to the ground.

Ten:
From the Mists of Time

Eric Blythe was a worried man as he paced about his hotel room in Rio de Janeiro. He had taken on the task of going back to look for Captain Vickery, the passengers, and his sea-mates Jakes and Gordon Mactavish; all of whom should have reached a beach to the north of where he, the bo'sun, and eighteen of the crew had been forced to land. His mind went over the events yet again. The division of the two groups had been unavoidable after the holing and sinking of *The Viking*, from which it had been loosely understood that they would head for the beach closest to the ship. There was little doubt that Vickery and the others should have landed there. It had begun with the prior drenching of the lifeboat's engine which, from the crashing waves, had to be thoroughly cleaned and dried before it would start; but during that time they had been carried two or three miles down the coast in the grip of a northerly current.

Unless Vickery's group had been delayed, this trivial event had in effect made it impossible to meet up with them. He had been tempted to go on his own towards the beach where they should have landed, but after waiting inland a full day, he had to follow his first duty to travel north to Rio with the men under him; there they could draw their wages and join the crew of the next Blue Circle ship bound for Liverpool.

The trend of Eric's thoughts were rudely broken into by a light knocking on his door. He strode towards it in an ill humour and opened it roughly, ready to take out some of his frustrations on whoever was disrupting his thoughts. But his depression changed into one of surprise, for there before him stood one of his crew, Marcus Law, a large and unusually powerful man, looking worried and ill at ease. Eric pulled himself together.

'Come in, man. What on earth are you doing here? The last I saw of yourselves and the bo'sun was going aboard one of the

Company's ships, *The Scythia*, bound for Liverpool tomorrow.'

'Well, sir, it's like this; my mate, Boris, and I knew what was in your mind; to go back and look for the Captain and the others. Anyway, sir, we didn't reckon it right that you should go alone all those miles in a foreign country, so we decided we ought to come along too. I hope we did right?'

'To nursemaid a lonely officer!'

'No, no, sir, that's not the way it was! We just thought that in such a foreign country, big too, that you'd be glad of our help. We told the bo'sun, and he agreed.'

'And where's Boris – Boris Kanlewski, isn't it?'

'Waiting along the passage, sir. You'll remember him – a thin man, Russian, but tough and reliable; also very clever, with all sorts of skills. Good on languages, and can get along in the local lingo. That's about all, sir. We just thought you could do with us.' Marcus was a man of few words, and he was beginning to look sheepish and embarrassed under Eric's eagle eye.

'Go and call him in, Marcus. There's no point in us talking without your partner,' said Eric.

In spite of himself he felt a sense of relief stealing over him; it would probably prove to be very helpful to have these two able men with him. Marcus he knew as a strong, likeable, loyal and courageous man. He remembered Boris Kanlewski as a typical Russian, wiry and tough, but quiet, a loner, not an easy mixer among his fellow crewmen. Eric had never heard anyone complain about him aboard *The Viking*; his work was always exemplary, but there was a hint in Eric's mind that he could be a dangerous man in a tight corner. Well, so what, he thought; such hidden strengths could prove to be invaluable.

The two men shambled in. 'Sit down, both of you,' said Eric. 'There's an armchair of sorts, and a hard one by the dressing table.'

This they both did, looking slightly uncomfortable as they sat while their officer remained standing; a deliberate pose on Eric's part, since seated men can feel at a subtle disadvantage when addressed by one who is standing over them.

Eric turned first to Boris, 'Tell me, for you must have discussed this between you, also with the bo'sun; are your reasons

for jumping ship and wanting to link up with me the same as Marcus's?

'They are, sir. Also a bit of adventure. Now that *The Viking's* gone we're not happy about joining another ship, and perhaps being split up. Captain Vickery was a good Captain and a good man. I want to see this business through, find the answers, before I can move to another ship. Another thing, sir, for I know you'll ask it: the bo'sun was keen that we should join up with you in the search for Captain Vickery and the others, and he said he'd make it all right with the Company regarding our wages and back pay. You see, we're still working for the Company; I hope you'll back us on this, sir?'

Eric laughed. 'No flies on you, Boris,' he said, and was rewarded with a rare smile from that dour man. 'I don't foresee any problems with what you say. You can take it that I will most certainly support your claim on continuing wages. I must tell you both that this is a relief to me, for I wouldn't have considered you joining up with me had it meant the loss of your wages and jobs.'

'Anyway, I'm glad to have you aboard, so to speak; but I must spell out the situation as I see it. Firstly, Marcus, the distance back to the beach we're looking for is just over two thousand miles! It's a long way, and much of it, as you've already seen travelling up, is desolate, with fewer people living on the land the further south one goes. If we're careful, money ought not to be a great problem as I have, well, savings, which I've already called in. The easiest and quickest way to reach their beach would be to fly as far south as one can, with the uncertainty of being able to hire a car from there, but this would put too great a strain on my funds.'

'Remember also that we landed on the coast sixteen days ago. Assuming that Captain Vickery and his party landed on their beach before us, and started travelling inland and north the same day, or early the next morning; if so, they should be here by now, and it's odd that in spite of making enquiries on our way, I never heard even a whisper, or the hint of a clue, as to their being on the same route. Bear in mind that there's only one main road, certainly in Patagonia, and probably up to Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Anyway, the coastal road is the shortest and obvious one to take. Are you both with my sketchy train of thought?'

They nodded and agreed that they had understood, although it was plain that Boris had the keener mind, and it was he who voiced the obvious question. 'Yes, sir; but do you think we could make it back to the beach in two weeks? We were lucky with lifts, and later buses and a train, but I think it could be harder on the return trip, although I can't really say why.'

'Good point, Boris. For several reasons it does seem to be more difficult getting into the bleaker and emptier regions of the world than getting out, and we must bear it in mind. Think of this, too; assuming that we take as long on returning south, add three days in Rio, and that'll be over a month gone by: this time span concerns me most for a variety of reasons. I was planning a return journey on the same route we took getting here, keeping as close a watch as possible that we're not passed by the Captain and his party. Of course this will be much easier with the three of us, especially as I understand that you, Boris, have a fair smattering of Portuguese. We'll have to make enquiries at every stop we make, combing our route as best we can. However, the rail runs as far south as Bahia Blanca, and although trains are few and far between, at least in the south, it would be very difficult to make more than a cursory check on passengers. At the same time we must also make every attempt to shorten our travelling time, even down to four days; I hope not more than five.'

'I want to start early tomorrow. Cost-wise, I'm not too hopeful, but I'll go out now and see if I can hire a car of some sort; even buy an old jalopy, for I don't know how we'd stand crossing two national boundaries in a hired car. If you have any suggestions, I'd like to have them,' Eric concluded.

'With respect, sir,' Marcus replied, 'I think that Boris and I would be better suited to finding what you need at a reasonable price. Will you come with us now, sir?'

Eric's inner sigh of relief was almost audible. 'I felt sure you two would be able to handle such a matter better than I could, and you probably know just where to look, too.'

'At the right price, I think we could find you what we need,' Marcus replied modestly; 'if you don't mind pounding the streets with us for an hour or two, sir?'

'I'd be delighted to. Should be quite an experience. This time I

rather think I'll be on the learning end.' His two listeners grinned happily. 'Just one more thing; where are you staying?'

'At a sort of seaman's rest house near the docks. Bit of a dump run by a couple of very slippery types. Have to watch our backs; very slick with their knives they are around there. But don't worry about us, sir; we can look out for ourselves.'

'I'm sure of that,' replied Eric, who had seen something of the rougher side in docks around the world. 'We'll make a good team. All being well, we'll meet here early tomorrow morning, and leave as soon as we're ready. Meanwhile let's go; I want to see if you two can find me a car, one that is reliable and tough, for the roads are generally poor, especially going south in Argentina where there's no tarmac, only corrugations and dust.'

Even to Eric, who had been seasoned in a tough school in Norway, the next two hours or so were quite an education. Marcus had been the ship's carpenter as well as one of the general crew, but it turned out that he was no slouch at mechanics, and had an unusual flair for picking out a sound car from a yard cluttered with many others, while ignoring the smooth-talking salesman who dogged their heels. Meanwhile Boris provided a two-way translation, for Marcus showed a smart side to his mechanical abilities, and kept up a running commentary on the condition of the cars he quickly checked over, along with their deficiencies and true value. As they moved from one vehicle to another, this unremitting pressure was wearing the salesman down; and from extolling their bargain values, his fixed smile and bargain talk faded in the face of these two sailors, who knew their minds and what they were about. Eric trailed behind these two very able young men, lost in admiration at Marcus's mechanical know-how and Boris's slick use of his pidgin Portuguese. He was especially heartened by their ease and quickness when they worked as a team, which boded well for the coming days and weeks.

In this fashion they passed through two car sales yards, as well as wandering through various backstreets, approaching people whose cars stood in the dusty roads, and who looked as though they could be only too glad to sell their vehicles. Again, Marcus and Boris worked smoothly as a team, unerringly picking their

targets. Here Boris took the lead with his fair knowledge of the language, while Marcus selected any cars that looked well cared for. At length, a little over two hours after leaving Eric's hotel, Marcus stopped by a clean-looking Morris Minor. Boris went to the house alongside the car, and knocked at the door. A nervous, clerical type of man soon opened it. Here Boris's manner changed to suit the person; no longer was he the slick talking man with the salesmen on their courtyards. Instead he became gentle and courteous, almost wooing the owner of the car into seeing things his way. It did not take long, for in fact the owner, Stephano, was on hard times, having lost his job, and really could no longer afford to keep the car. Marcus looked it over, pronounced himself satisfied, and in a very short time a deal was struck, the car papers passed over, and Eric was happy to pay out considerably less than he had expected. Everyone was pleased at the conclusion of the deal – especially Marcus, who said, 'You've got an amazing bargain there, sir. The car's in very clean condition.'

'Thanks to you two. You must surely have done this sort of thing before. You make a formidable team. Who could say "No"?'

Eric drove the Morris back to his hotel, dropping his two sailors off at their seamen's retreat, agreeing a time to meet at the hotel the following morning. He then went out again with his list of requirements, and topped up the petrol tank and two jerricans that he bought at the petrol station. After which, with the easy-going manager's permission, he left the car to one side of the forecourt, crossed the wide road, and went into a small supermarket. There he bought a narrow but ample selection of bread, canned foods, and three three-litre water containers, along with other essentials.

At eight next morning, in the small well-loaded car, they set off on their long drive south. At first it was slow going through Rio de Janeiro, easing considerably on the leg to São Paulo. Through both these cities Boris was invaluable at either reading the road signs, or leaning out of the passenger window and calling for directions. With these delays it was after half-past two by the time they were clear of São Paulo, driving more freely on the coastal road heading south.

Eric stopped after a few miles, and handed the driving over to

Marcus. Only he and Marcus could drive, but Boris was quite happy as the front-seat 'spotter', watching as best he could for any of Vickery's party in oncoming vehicles. It was a wearing role, one that called for the spotter to lean forward, angling his head to see above his normal field of vision. But in spite of his good nature, it was necessary to relieve him from time to time, for with the passing speed of enclosed trucks, high-riding buses and cars, the chances of being able to spot their comrades was as slim as Eric had feared, at least while there was a reasonable amount of traffic on the road. It'll be easier, he thought, after we've passed Porto Alegre.

Without the restraints of having to use buses or beg for lifts, they made good time in the Morris; even so they had to curb their speed, so allowing a better chance to spot any known faces in passing vehicles. An hour later they stopped and had a snack, after which Eric changed places with Boris, who promptly fell asleep on the back seat. Eric had hoped to reach Curitiba before they had to stop for the night, nearly five hundred miles from Rio; this they did as the sinking sun glowed redly over the hills to their right. They pulled up on the fringe of the town, and while Eric remained with the car, Boris and Marcus asked where they could find lodgings for the night. They soon returned with what they had learned: perhaps because there was a small airport bordering the town, good, clean lodgings were hard to find and more expensive in Curitiba. However, if they were to drive through the town a short distance, they would see a road on their left leading to Paranagua, a little place on a bluff overlooking the ocean; there they would find very good lodgings at a reasonable price.

Marcus drove through the small town, and found the turning without any trouble. Paranagua was little more than a hamlet, within sight and sound of the sea. They soon found the lodgings recommended to them, which were ideal. Eric booked two rooms, Marcus and Boris in one, and he took another. After a good meal of fish and chilli peppers, he left the two sailors to go in search of a drink before turning in.

The evening was warm, the sky clear, and Eric had a strong urge that drew him to seek solace on the bluff overlooking the sea. He yearned for the oceans, more deeply than he had realised.

From the Mists of Time

The sea had been his whole life since childhood, and beyond to his father, and his father's father. Now he sought some place where he might think and dream with the dark horizon as a backdrop; the feel of the sea as it moved with a rhythm of its own, glinting in the moonlight; founded in silence, yet with an infinitely varied music drawn from its depths. Time passed, and as Eric lay back on the warm grass, absorbing the very heartbeat of the Earth, he fell into a strange sleep, one that welcomed him into a world of beauty and wonder, yet which smiled sadly on the one on which he lay.

Eric felt himself falling out of that world, drawn away in time. He saw Captain Vickery and a helmsman on the bridge of *The Viking*. Vickery looked tired and strained as the ship pitched heavily in a huge following sea; first the stern rose, followed by the whole ship being heaved up by a giant roller, to be driven bows-on under its own power and the surge of the sea; like some giant projectile the vessel shot forward and down into the pit of the preceding wave. As Eric watched this drama being repeated again and again, he became aware that he could see into people and things. He saw the ocean's bed rising as the ship moved closer to the land; he saw also a great undersea spur of rock directly ahead of *The Viking's* course.

He tried to cry out to Vickery, but his cries were not audible in the world of matter. In a helpless agony of mind he watched as the ship rose on the third wave, vaster even than the two before. He saw in awful clarity that this great roller would take *The Viking* to its death. And so it was: the ship shot forward to its lowest point and, with a shuddering impact, was pierced by the sharp spur of immovable rock, driven on by its speed and mass. She was ripped open for more than a quarter of her length. The shock was such that people were thrown about like rag dolls in some macabre dance. The last of the ship's two remaining masts snapped off like a dried twig, crashing onto the already crumpled bridge, catching Louis Jardine a glancing blow that cracked his skull, killing him outright. Vickery was trapped under a tangle of girders and stays, his lower body crushed, his hips broken and his vital organs pierced and bleeding. Eric saw plainly that his Captain would die on his bridge; he could not live for long. Meanwhile

The Viking lay hooked on the sharp-pointed spur of rock, pinned like a butterfly to a board.

Helpless to take part, Eric could only watch, his mind in a turmoil, living again through a different perspective. Unaware at the time of the devastation on the crumpled bridge, Eric saw himself chivying the remaining crew towards the only usable lifeboat; but he had lived through this, and had no wish to see what was already burned into his mind. Rising higher, he saw Curtis Maitland and Paulos with the two children, Pietro and Ruth, jump from the stern to begin their long swim to the beach ahead. Immediately after, he saw Jakes leave the stern of the ship, filled with anxiety for Vickery, and make his interrupted way to the bridge. In spite of *The Viking's* violent end, as an observer Eric could not help but be tremendously impressed by the disciplined reordering of the ship's crew, and a feeling of warmth and pride flooded through him; he felt deeply privileged to have been one of them.

Smoke was already billowing up through the companionways, jetting from open portholes, from the great rent in the ship's side, and seeping through opened seams in the decking, wrenched and distorted by the sudden impact, and from the strains imposed on the old ship by the cyclonic storm through which they had so recently battled. Eric watched what he had not seen before, the smoke thickening and flames beginning to light the smudgy fumes. In the midst of all this he saw Jakes on the tangled bridge, and the anguish in him weighed heavily on Eric. He saw into Jakes' thoughts, and felt the growing despair as he knelt beside his friend. Eric knew he should not intrude, so he moved away; but he could not help hearing Vickery's words on Pietro: those he was destined to hear, for they rang through space. He listened, and wondered at what magic there had been aboard this last voyage of *The Viking*.

Eric thought back to Rio de Janeiro, and saw that what followed had been the start of many subtly interlocking events, thoughts and deeds, from the cloud-wrapped past and this spell at sea: cyclonic storms in those southerly latitudes were very rare; the titanic struggles they had endured, both in the storm and after, leading eventually to the death of *The Viking* and the loss of

several lives; the shadowless light from the exploding ship's brilliant fireball; and where were Jakes and the passengers? With all these strange occurrences, Eric felt that since they had left Rio, all on board had been entwined in a strangely guided destiny, that nothing had fallen by chance. He knew also that everyone had a role to play in this drama, that human reactions during the dramatic events had blended, and come together from the day when Pietro and Ruth had stepped on board in Rio de Janeiro. One way or another, those who lived and those who died, had passed through this same sieve: a miniature pattern in destiny's economy of purpose.

Eric was anxious to go to the beach directly ahead of the pinned *Viking*, but in that moment he saw the chief, Gordon Mactavish, plod heavily up the twisted steps to the bridge. He paused, for he had heard nothing about Gordon after the impact, and he wanted to see how he reacted to Vickery dying, and to the grieving Jakes by his side; also if Gordon escaped. Eric watched and heard the brief conversation between Mactavish and Jakes, and was not impressed. There's a hard-nosed Scot, if ever there was, he thought angrily, and watched him as he went back down to the now smouldering deck. In swirling smoke, a handkerchief over his nose and mouth, he pressed on to where a life raft was lashed to the superstructure.

Eric wondered at the chief's action, for the ship's two life rafts were just that, with two paddles lashed to their sides. Even in a calm sea they were heavy and difficult to move; easy enough for two, one on either side, but with one they were clumsy and too intractable to guide as they tended to turn in a circle. Eric saw how ill equipped the chief was to cope with an emergency such as lay before him; he showed no signs of removing the heavy boots he wore in the engine room, nor of wearing his life jacket, which swung loosely in his hand. Gordon Mactavish was an excellent chief engineer, but desperately lacking when it came to elementary seamanship.

Oozing fuel and engine oil from the burning core of the riven ship, the sea was now slicked with spreading flames, fed from the seeping hot oils pressurised within the vessel. Eric watched as Gordon loosened the raft, then with considerable difficulty

dragged it nearer the stern where the sea was as yet free of oil. Made to carry several people, the raft was very heavy. Gordon was unusually strong, but even so he had a huge struggle before he was able to heft it over the side and into the sea which, with the heel of the ship, was but a few feet below the railing.

This done, he jumped, hoping to keep dry by landing on the raft, but it was moving in the turbulence of the waves, and tilted under his weight, pitching him into the sea, still holding his life jacket. Now sodden, his heavy clothes and boots dragged at him, making it very hard to climb onto the bucking raft which, now free and almost weightless in its element, was pitching wildly about. Gordon slung his life jacket onto its surface, and after several failed attempts managed to clamber aboard. He was well aware of the dangers of a burning oil slick, which he could see some twenty metres away, so he grasped a paddle and dug it frantically into the sea, only to begin a circular swing.

However, he was fortunate in being so close to the stern, for as the raft was swinging, it was caught by the northerly current, the same that had taken Eric and his crew far down the coastline when their lifeboat engine would not start. Eric watched as that lonely figure, stubborn and independent to the last, sailed helplessly south along the coastline of the long bay, with little control over the raft he rode, and drawing no nearer to the land it followed.

Only Vickery had induced some sort of working relationship with Gordon; Jakes, Eric and others had never got on close terms with him, nor had any attempted to wedge open the barrier of wariness which Gordon had set between himself and the other officers. A short time passed, and with sadness and pity Eric saw Gordon drift away to the south. The current would draw him no nearer to the coast, and his raft would drift until it met with the westerlies, to be sent scudding across the Atlantic. No man could live that long in those cold and heaving seas. The chief engineer carried only his life jacket with its twelve ship's biscuits and a small bottle of water. As Gordon passed out of his life, Eric hoped he would be seen and rescued before it was too late; but this was a lonely coastline, sunken back as it was from the main shipping routes.

From the Mists of Time

Eric looked down at the flattened bridge; only the compass on the brass binnacle was left standing in the heavy, viscous smoke. On the tangled floor, the deck plates were now hot to touch, and the oily darkness swirled thickly above the two remaining men. Captain Vickery, Master of *The Viking*, had died on his own bridge, soon to be wrapped in his funeral pyre. Eric saw that his face was at peace and strangely beautiful; and he knew again, more keenly than before, how much he had loved and respected this man. *Death has a sharp tooth*, he thought, as he felt the pain of loss. At the same time he knew this was not the end of his search while in this dream, or time warp, or perhaps the subtle entwining of both.

Eric could see clearly through the dense smoke. He watched as Jakes climbed heavily to his feet, his face wet with tears as he pulled on his life jacket, took one last look at his old friend, and started towards the bent and twisted steps leading down from the bridge. In that moment, on a final and terrible scale, there was a metallic tearing noise that rang through every plate and rivet of the vessel: *The Viking* shuddered as she slid further off the jutting undersea rock, and then again, and again; and with each jarring move the ship slipped ever further on its starboard beam, until it was angled more sharply than it could ever have rolled at sea. Jakes paused, kept his balance, and then coolly stepped off into the sea, which was now almost immediately below him.

Eric watched as he swam away, trying to avoid the spreading streamers of burning fuel and oil slick; but this was only partially possible, and as often as not he had to swim through the flames. Eric felt for him, knowing full well the damage that burning oil can do to eyes, skin and lungs. His mind was in a turmoil, pulled first one way and then another by all he had seen; but also deeply frustrated, in that he was unable to help or change the course of events by even the tiniest degree. At length Jakes was through the last burning tendrils of oil and fuel slick; but Eric watched as he repeatedly doused his head in the sea, rubbing his eyes at the same time. He wondered how much damage Jakes had suffered from the toxic fumes.

Shortly after there was a giant explosion in the bowels of *The Viking*. In that moment the old ship was literally ripped open, followed by a billowing fireball that rose high above the wreck;

fuelling itself it shone brilliantly for a while, its inner generating light reflecting and optically deflecting within its body, shining and turning the dull cloud-hidden sky into an eerie day, bathing even shadows in its pervasive light, so that all within the ambit of its brilliance was lit as one. But Eric had seen enough of this strange light that had been the partial cause of his being unable to land on the beach ahead.

Save for the bow of the ship, the explosion blew the bent and shattered hull off the jutting spear of undersea rock; with a loud sizzling of hot metal biting into the cold sea the burnt and broken wreck sank to the bottom leaving a spread of froth and bubbling wavelets from the pockets of escaping air. Within minutes it was over and the sea had claimed *The Viking* as its own. Eric watched as he thought of Vickery: he was one of the finest men he had known; the sea had been in his blood; it was right and fitting that his body went down with his ship.

Time moved on, and Eric found himself on the cliff-entrapped beach, about a kilometre or more ahead of where *The Viking* had sunk. He saw that on either side were similar beaches, but on these the cliff began to fall away. Riding the winds of time, his inner sight was heightened and he could see into living organisms, and through most translucent barriers, such as water; so to the far north of the beach he was able to spot a narrow, overgrown and difficult route that led to the cliff top, one that could be climbed by any reasonably healthy adult or child. He watched as both Maitland and Paulos searched working towards each other from either end but he knew that neither would find this scaleable path.

Eric turned his attention to Jakes and the children, and realised at once that his friend was blind and virtually helpless; his sight lost in the toxic fumes given off by the burning oil slicks; his face and hands burnt in the flames. Now he was being led about the beach by either Pietro or Ruth. Eric's heart flared in sorrow at this sight of his friend; yet at the same time he knew that Jakes would find a strange and unique companionship which, for the time being at any rate, would be a panacea for his loss of sight, the pain from his burnt face and hands and of Vickery's very recent death.

Eric looked at Ruth as she held Jakes' hand and saw in her an

innocent happiness, and with it a warm interdependency that had sprung up between them both. Remembering what the dying Vickery had so urgently needed to tell Jakes about Pietro, and having some similar intuitive feelings, it was with some anxiety that he forced himself to look towards where Pietro was gathering driftwood. At first he seemed to be unaware of his presence; but then he straightened up, and for a brief spell they looked directly at each other. In that moment Eric knew that Pietro had recognised him in his time-travelling guise, who he was and why he was there. The contact was brief, yet in that space Eric felt Pietro's presence like a fresh light-embodied breath of air gently flowing around him. Under that influence any apprehensions he might have felt before were scattered like dry wind-blown leaves in autumn. During those fleeting seconds, and in spite of his awareness, he was conscious that Pietro was shielding more of himself than he had revealed. Eric looked again, but saw only the boy bending to collect driftwood lying about on the beach. He blinked, and wondered; but he was more than content with what he had seen and felt.

Time passed, and Eric stood by Henry Curtis in the dark of night as he lay by their fire. Like a guardian angel, only Pietro was awake by his side. Eric saw that this great man was dying, a man whom he had liked and admired, even from the infrequent times they had met and talked together on *The Viking*. He sighed, and left him in worthier hands than his own.

Effortlessly Eric waited while the next day came and went. Then, later still, he watched as Jim Maitland started to climb the cliff. He saw how at over fifty years of age he had overestimated his fitness and stamina; now he lay with a burst heart on the wind-blown summit, with only his spirit and determination to keep him going. He saw Paulos attempt the same climb before Maitland was even near the summit. He saw it all: Paulos's accident, fear and pain; then his shame... Maitland's incredible determination and courage, followed by his fall, and his accepted death on the edge of the beach to their south; how he had lain there, broken but alive, unable to move; why he had refused to cry out, knowing the appalling difficulty and terrible danger in attempting to climb the craggy barrier between the two beaches –

and to what purpose? He knew he was finished, but he was in no pain now, and justly at peace with himself. His great effort must remain to serve Jakes and the two children. He had not prayed with feeling and faith for many years; now he prayed earnestly for acceptance and death.

The rest of that day passed, and it was during the following night that Jim Maitland's body finally gave in, and like a wraith to the symphonic grandeur of the sea and the mournful howl of the wind, his courageous spirit passed on and up. Eric was stunned by all that had passed; at the hardships endured, and by their nobility and courage while he and the remaining crew were travelling north to Rio de Janeiro. At the same time, he was never quite sure if it was he who had moved back in time, or if time had gathered him up to show him these past events by reflection, as one can be dazzled and bemused in a hall of mirrors.

Eric saw Paulos make it to the top of the cliff, his left arm hanging loosely by his side, his face an expressionless mask; but behind it lay a tumult of emotions. Fear matched with what he thought to be his life of failure, failure by introspection and by sheltering in his vocation as a priest; his growing admiration for Jim Maitland, for his courage and tenacity, and for what Paulos recognised as his stability in thought and action.

Eric read the priest's mind as he lay exhausted on the rough grass; his thoughts were in a turmoil, for he had been cast roughly into a sequence of events which had eclipsed his prior experience. Eric saw Paulos as a good man, but that his life as a priest had unwittingly misled him into the false trap of security and insularity, shielded behind the walls of his Church, so contracting both his thinking and his outlook.

Eric felt for Paulos as he lay on the grass, recovering; for with his gift of inner sight he could see how this emotional tangle of guilt, with a host of other intruding factors, were stirring him into some fanatical reaction; in part to earn Maitland's respect, even from his ghost. His thoughts, warped by years of routine security that dragged at him, meritorious as they were; but which had weakened his resolution to face the trials that lay ahead. Before this he had Maitland's presence and courage to sustain him, but now Paulos felt very alone. The great cyclonic storm with its

ever-present perils and loss of lives; the shipwreck and its varied aftermath; the cliff with Maitland's fall, stemming solely from his own accident and agony. *How dare he go on? How dare he not?* Because of Paulos's fragile state of mind at the time, Eric was unable to assess with any certainty how he would react when he had recovered his strength.

Eric had not long to wait. Paulos shakily hauled himself to his feet, clutching his damaged left shoulder, looked over the cliff and up at the sun in the afternoon sky, then set off at a stiff-legged trot towards the west. He had been a good distance runner, for before long he had flexed his leg muscles and lengthened his stride; breathing easily as the miles slipped away under his feet. However, as the hours passed and weariness worked its way into his already tired body, Eric saw how Paulos was being deceived by the curvature of the Earth, and the low sweep of the sun, so veering his course south of west. Later, with the sun lower in the sky, he seemed instinctively to realise his mistake, and in his now halting stride he slanted slightly north of west. Eric doubted he would have made such an error had he been in his normal frame of mind; but he was tired and mentally shocked before leaving the cliff top, confused further by the switchback formation of the land, so adding some miles to his run, and pushing his body far beyond its limit.

As Paulos wore himself out, Eric anxiously watched his face more closely; his glazed and feverish eyes clearly indicated a sick and fanatical mind, one deeply troubled by doubt; but without thought, for he had but a single chord. Eric knew that Paulos would keep going until his body gave out; already he was weaving about from side to side, tripping and occasionally falling; but luckily he stumbled on to a refreshing rivulet; then further, within easy sight of some stone-built houses, he was forced to crawl a while, before staggering to his feet, clutching a sapling for support. Eric watched until he saw that Paulos had been seen by the occupant of the largest and nearest house. A man came out and strode towards the limp and bedraggled body; with his help Paulos was helped into the house. Eric's vigil was over; now he felt he should return to the beach. With a thought he was there.

Nothing had changed, save that night was closing in. Eric

went towards the fire, around which were gathered Jakes, Pietro and Ruth. Jakes and Ruth were unaware of his presence, but Pietro knew. The boy rose to his feet, looked deeply into Eric's eyes, then reached out an arm and touched him on the forehead. And as from a dream, in a smooth transition of flickering thought, he was awake, back on the bluff overlooking the sea at Paranagua; yet he knew that all the multifaceted, but clearly etched memories had been real, and with that vivid reality imprinted on Eric's mind was a parting message, which amounted to three injunctions:

*'Return in peace to your body and your time.
Here you have seen all you need to know.
Deal wisely with this knowledge.'*

Eric looked out to sea, and saw that the waning daylight was the same as when he had dropped off into a light doze on the warm grass, seemingly hours before. He looked again and saw a great white bird flying in from the sea, its streamlined body and wings tinged with a roseate hue, enhanced in the waning light of the sinking sun. The bird bore with it a magnetic beauty, a perfection in its graceful flight. As it passed overhead, Eric felt that this wondrous bird had been sent as a sign and a seal to the reality and truth of all that he had seen. He watched as it flew inland, until it was lost beyond his sight in the glowing red of the sky; after which Eric's mind went back to the tragic and wonderful experiences he had seen and passed through; but rankling in his mind above all, he thought on the clear telepathic messages that Pietro had passed to him from the beach.

The words had been crystal clear. Eric had indeed seen all he needed to know; it would plainly be a fruitless waste of time and energy to travel any further south; besides which he did not relish a repeat journey over the long and sparsely populated Patagonian scrubland. He was also uncertain of being able to find where they had struck the earth-graded track nearest the beach. Pietro's concluding injunction – 'To deal wisely with this knowledge' – was the most puzzling; he could not see the world accepting such seemingly wild experiences; in any case, how and to whom would he impart such knowledge?

From the Mists of Time

Sighing, Eric got to his feet to return to the inn; he must tell Marcus and Boris of his decision; but he wavered, foreseeing that to them his tale would appear as no more than an hallucination. Eric had both a quick and keen mind, and a lively imagination; but these gifts were of poor service to him now as he pondered how best to explain to the two men what, and how, he knew all that had come to pass. He fell into a cold sweat as he shrunk from the impact tales of time-travel would have on these two hardened seamen. But other than a dream, or extended to a vision, there were no possible variations to his journey in time, or none that he could see.

In his troubled state of mind (for his reputation could hang in the balance), Eric did not return directly to the inn as he had intended, but walked around the bluff until only the starlight in a bright, clear sky gave him enough light to see where to place his feet. At length he turned his steps towards the inn: he would tell them what he knew, but in a simplified and contracted form. Pushing open the outer door, he went in, greeted the *tabernero*, and asked where his two companions were. It seemed they were out; probably having a drink at a small pub not far up the road. Eric could not help but be mightily relieved as he made his way to his room and bed. Tomorrow was another day, he thought. He might have some better inspiration by then.

Early the next morning, Eric met Marcus and Boris at breakfast. Both men looked more than a trifle uncomfortable, even worried. He joined them at their table.

‘What’s up with you two this bright and sunny morning?’ Eric asked as he pulled in his chair. ‘I’m as hungry as a shark.’ But under his light tone, his responsive mind had picked up their apprehension; at the same time he felt that the subject about which they were bolstering their courage would in fact be closely related to his own concerns of the evening before.

Boris was the first to speak, and while Marcus concentrated on a doubled slice of bread and jam, he turned to Eric. ‘Sir, this is hard for me to explain, and perhaps for you to believe, but both Marcus and I had very odd experiences... dreams, sir... wouldn’t have given them much attention, ’cept that both of us had the same, and they were to do with us being here, our drive down

south.' Boris turned to the silent Marcus, who was mauling his chunk of bread and jam, 'Isn't that so, Marcus?'

'Boris is right, sir; but he's better at explaining.'

Eric cut in. 'Tell me about these dreams, Boris.'

'Well, sir, it's like this: both dreams are the same, and both quite simple. We saw this boy, about twelve or thirteen years old, all lit up; well, not quite lit up like, but there was a sort of glow around him. Never seen anything like it before; looked like some pictures of angels I've seen on cards and in some books. Anyway, sir, he said as like we should not go on; we should go back. He said there's nothing to go on for because everything was all right with the Captain, Mr Jakes and the others. And that was it, sir. Sounds a bit odd, I suppose; but I know from my church-going that we should do what the boy said. You see, he wasn't just an ordinary boy. Anyway, this must be where we get off and somehow get back to Rio. We're very sorry.' He hesitated, and then added, 'Perhaps you were thinking the same thing, sir? We saw you on the headland last night, and you looked very worried.'

'And was your dream the same, Marcus?' asked Eric.

'Exactly the same, sir,' replied Marcus, looking more at ease now that Boris had spoken out on their behalf.

'Well,' Eric said, with an inner sigh of relief, 'it so happens that I had a very similar sort of dream, and I was worried about how to tell you two. That settles it: we'll return to Rio and catch one of our ships from there.' He paused, thought quickly, and then asked, 'Tell me, did either of you recognise the boy in your dreams?'

'Can't say as we did, sir,' Marcus said. 'There was a lot of light.'

'He couldn't have looked like Pietro from *The Viking*, I suppose?' put in Eric.

'No, sir. Leastways, we couldn't tell. As Marcus said, there was a lot of light around the boy. Does it matter, sir? To us it must have been an angel,' replied Boris quite simply, plainly puzzled at the question.

'No, it doesn't matter at all,' said Eric gently. 'It's what he is, not who he is, that's important.'

And that was the end of their hunt for their shipmates and the

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passengers. They returned to Rio de Janeiro, and in due course caught one of the ships of the Blue Circle Shipping Line sailing to Liverpool. The car had served them well, and Eric gave it to a Children's Home in Pietro Crevelli's name.

It was with mixed feelings of peace and sadness that Eric finally boarded the ship for Liverpool, a ship on which he would serve as first mate, for this home run at least.

Eleven:
André and the Butterfly Man

Muzzily, Paulos struggled to free himself from the soothing, clinging mists that oiled heavily about him, gently smothering his struggles. For a while its fronds clung softly, wrapping him in a warm and comfortable cocoon. It would have been easy to have let its gentle enticement dominate his will, for a warm and insulating weariness swept over him. At the same time there was an insistent tugging that pulled in his chest, frightening and spurring him to fight to be free of its restricting coils. Then, dimly at first, there steadied before his inner eye the windswept beach he had left behind, its lower reaches crunched by huge Atlantic rollers; and then of three people seated around a fire, not far from the base of a high black cliff.

Paulos's stunned brain was both shocked and reluctant, but it could not hide behind a deeply seated disturbance that his memory had revealed; a gradual gathering of circumstances that had so recently swept him along in a hazardous train of events.

He looked more closely, straining his inner sight to the faces of the three people: the largest was a man of middle years, a sailor, lean, weather-beaten and deeply lined. At first Paulos could not clearly see the two smaller figures; their shapes were vague and misty, though there was a strange sense of light and power around one of them, magnetic and compelling, which sent an electric tingle through his mind, vibrating and tantalising the shrouded nerve endings of his stunned memory.

Reluctantly he looked back at the sailor, and this time saw that he was blind, his sightless eyes and scarred face stared out to sea. Blind, and suffering from exposure and hunger; yet there was no feeling of despair or loneliness about him. In fact an atmosphere of warmth and light pervaded the bleak and inhospitable scene about them, mysteriously rolling back the elements that raged about them.

André and the Butterfly Man

The picture faded from Paulos's mind; the mists drifted away, and his eyes dragged themselves open to see, sitting beside his bed, the broadly built man of the house. But there was a difference; before he had appeared as grim and forbidding, whereas now, although weather-beaten by nature and the raging winds of southern Patagonia, there was that about him which spoke of a strong but gentle nobility, which went far to counteract Paulos's first impression when he was clinging to a sapling, exhausted and wracked by fever.

'*Despierto!* I'm glad to see you awake at last.' He spoke in Spanish, his dialect rough and far removed from the *hidalgos'* high-flown Spanish in Madrid, and laced with traces of Portuguese; but the man's voice was deep and pleasantly reassuring, and Paulos was well used to the diversity of accents in the subcontinent of South America. However, before Paulos could attempt to answer, for he was still tired and slow to react, his host continued.

'You have been very ill with pneumonia, made worse by your state of weakness when I found you. Our nearest doctor is in Comodoro Rivadavia, about six hundred kilometres north – a day's journey. They have a small airport there, and a weekly plane that flies up the coast to Buenos Aires. This doctor travels when he can, but he has a big area to cover, and he's not been here for a little over a year now; so you can appreciate that we have to manage as best we can.

'The only other doctor I know is "the Butterfly Man"; he is learned in medicinal herbs; eccentric, but clever. He rides around on a donkey, sometimes alone, but more often he has with him a student or two. You must understand that he is a highly respected man in these parts, for many reasons which we need not go into now. Anyway, he was here the same evening that you were found by me. He is incredible, for when he comes it has always been when his help has been urgently needed – so you see how very fortunate you have been. At any rate he had some herbs in his bag, and together we prepared the medicines you can see on the dresser. He stayed for only one night, would take no money – he never does – and left early the next morning with his *chela*, as he calls all his students. He once told me that he had been in India

for several years, but no more than that. He doesn't talk much about himself or his past.

'Ah, there I go, talking too much. You will understand that I am the only educated man around here, and I miss being able to talk to others of a like mind. Of course there is the Butterfly Man; he is very knowledgeable, but he's not often here, and when he comes he never stays long. There is no need for any explanations, for the time at any rate. You talked much in your early delirium. I went to the beach you described, the one near to where your ship sank. If you are strong enough, I would like to tell you about it.'

Paulos nodded weakly. Memories were beginning to stir at the man's reference to the beach, and with them flooded back some of the burdens that he had borne since Maitland's death. But now the pain was a dead and empty thing, for his own courage and efforts had drawn out most of the shame he had felt; besides which he knew, even before the man had spoken, that as far as he was concerned he was too weak to go back to the beach. For the time being his life was sealed, and his host, who obviously knew this whole region, had gone in his place.

'First I should tell you that my name is André Canill, and my wife's is Maria. You are, I know, Father Paulos. When I brought you into my home and put you to bed you were quite out of your mind, barely conscious,' continued his host, leaning slightly forward in the small hard chair next to Paulos. 'Apart from the people living about here...'

But enough!' He looked sharply at the priest; then without another word, he rose from his chair and went over to a cheap deal dresser on which stood a variety of bottles and pots. Some of these he began to mix into two potions, talking in sporadic bursts, broken by periods of silence, while he concentrated on carefully measuring and mixing the various herbs which the Butterfly Man had left. His back was turned as he put his mind to the task in hand; but not all of his attention, and Paulos waited, dimly sensing that some revelation was at hand.

Without turning round, André Canill spoke as he pounded and mixed the medicinal leaves and berries.

'I told you my wife's name is Maria, implying that we have been caring for you.' His voice was steadier, slower, and there was

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a note of deep sorrow in the tone. 'That is not quite true, but I like to think it is, and that she is still with me. My wife died two years ago, so now I live alone. It's not so bad really; in fact I doubt if I would be any good at living on close quarters with other people; too used to my own ways, and perhaps too selfish!'

He turned quickly, proudly holding up a glass containing some amber-coloured fluid in one hand, and a pot of paste in the other. 'There! These will help you. The paste I'll rub into your chest; it has wonderful healing properties, and will do much to reduce the inflammation in your lungs. The mixture you must drink; it will take away your fever, and is also very soothing to the nerves. For your cut lips I have this simple antiseptic cream.'

In an easy manner André chatted on about this and that; nothing of importance, intent only that his soothing voice would relax Paulos as he attended to him.

'Well! You feel better now?' he asked, pulling the blankets up around his patient's shoulders, then standing back with an oddly whimsical air to admire his handiwork.

Paulos struggled to speak to convey his thanks, but strangely found it quite impossible beyond uttering an indecipherable croak, however hard he tried. He was forced to give up the attempt, so strove to nod as expressively as possible under the circumstances.

'My poor friend; you are in a sad state. But don't worry, your speech will come back as you get better; just give yourself time,' said André with commiseration. 'Anyway, let me tell you what I found on the beach. I think it will help you.'

'After I had carried you into the house, and at length into bed, you rambled on for several hours about all that had happened on *The Viking*, and after the ship was sunk. Naturally your speech was very disjointed, but as you were in such a bad state I had to sit with you all the time, so the full story gradually emerged; like a jigsaw puzzle I was able to put it into intelligible sequence and pattern. My God, what a strange and wonderful story!'

André paused reflectively. For a while he seemed quite unaware of Paulos's presence, his mind ranging miles away to a lonely storm-swept beach, his hands gripping into white-knuckled fists, while his powerful shoulders bulged slightly from

the intensity of his visualisation and thoughts. But the moment was brief, and he soon relaxed and smiled rather sadly, looking slightly embarrassed when he caught Paulos's eyes observing him.

He continued. 'Anyway, some hours later the Butterfly Man came; just like that. In the middle of the night, a crisp knock at my door, and he was standing there asking if he could see the sick man. Amazing! Among all these homesteads about here, only I knew of your presence at the time, nobody else. How did he know? He did. It's usually like that. So I brought him up to see you. He felt your forehead, talking quietly all the time, then dug in his bag and drew out some half-dried leaves, some dark red berries, and various herbs that he alone knows about; these he pounded and mixed and gave to you to drink. Soon after this you stopped babbling and became quiet, and shortly after fell asleep. The Butterfly Man showed me how to mix the remaining herbs, enough for three more doses, which he said would be sufficient to set you up again. He also gave me the embrocation to be rubbed on your chest.

'After this he graced my home for that night, and myself with his conversation. He is quite unique; a very erudite man; fascinating to listen to him. I forgot to tell you what he looks like: tall, well-built, but thin, almost gaunt, with long white hair and a neatly trimmed beard; his features reflect himself, broad forehead with an aquiline nose. But what is most striking about him are his eyes: blue, but incredibly clear and alive, as clear as the deep blue of the sky, or the clearest tropical seas. But that is only a physical description; what is truly magnetic is that his very soul shines through them. Why, I tell you, he can hold one with his eyes alone; to see into them is like reading a book with, in a sense, its meaning hidden, yet not. I cannot explain better. The Butterfly Man is quite simply unique, and I have travelled widely and seen much in the past, and perhaps will do so again. Yes, he is special; brilliant like a rare jewel. But it is his spirit that lies at the heart of the magnetism he has for us drab mortals. Every time I meet him, he has always left me more enlightened than before. I would like to ask him who he is, but something stops me at the very moment of speaking. I wonder who he is, I do indeed,' mused André, and fell silent for a while.

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Paulos also wondered; for while he was very weak, the herbal medications had not only taken away the fever, but also sharpened his mind as never before, and he could not help but be intrigued by André's account of the Butterfly Man. At the same time he felt, as he had with Jim Maitland, a mixture of admiration tinged with envy. Paulos knew this flaw in his nature, and he fought it down; yet it lingered, for he knew that envy in him could so easily slide into jealousy. He had hoped that the struggles with himself would have resolved the invading tangles in his mind, but not so. Here they rose again; these two men, Maitland and the Butterfly Man; and there were others from his past: in one way or another, all were apparently superior to himself.

André shook himself back to the present, breaking in at a low point in Paulos's introvert thoughts. 'But I was sidetracked into telling you something about the Butterfly Man. If you knew him, I think you would understand. Anyway, he plays a part in your own story, as you will soon learn. In your delirium you gave me your disjointed version and, as far as you knew, that of others on *The Viking*, then later on the beach. The more I pieced together in sequence, the more certain I became that I had to go to the beach, and see to those stranded there as soon as possible. Why? Curiosity, and to help them of course; but also because the more I gleaned from your fragmented emotions and events, the more certain I became that the fear which underlay the unnatural zeal on your run here from the cliff, disguised more than the death of your courageous friend, Maitland, and more than your misguided shame. No, my poor sick friend, I sensed a wonderful mystery underlying so much from your delirium.

'You mustn't think that I'm being judgmental; none of us can be so clear-sighted and true of mind as to have no shadows, no fears or recriminations; even a priest such as yourself! No, what lit my mind was that I felt that you knew of this mystery – one that came aboard your ship at Rio de Janeiro. However, your vocation and training had created built-in barriers against accepting such an outrageous phenomenon; you pushed it aside, thrust it far down so that your thinking could more easily reject it.

'I will tell you frankly that your fears affected me too; and were not easily cast aside. Fear is contagious, and as yours showed

up more sharply as your adventures became clearer from your disjointed talk, I also felt a growing mixture of apprehension and curiosity. However, as you rambled on it seemed to me that your fear was an illusion in hiding. But it is not my place to give my opinion any further; I mention it here because all you experienced has to be viewed through this perspective.'

André was clear-sighted and honest, but impetuous in voicing his mind. He knew this, felt a little embarrassed, and looked towards Paulos to see his reaction; but there was no hurt or hostility in Paulos's eyes. In fact André sensed a change in his patient. He waited patiently as Paulos struggled to speak: it came, but slowly and laboriously at first as he struggled with his weakness.

Then, more quietly, almost in a throaty whisper, Paulos said, 'What you said regarding my fears is probably correct. I am on holiday by orders of our doctor and my Superior. I've never been to sea before, but they thought that a return trip round the Horn would help me to see something of the wider world. They said I was in a rut! This is the first time I have been away from my mission and the Church, and I admit to being unsure of myself.' He paused and looked quizzically at André, then added, 'Yes, apprehensive and nervous are more accurate.'

André was delighted. 'You're growing stronger every minute. The Butterfly Man's medicines are working well; but I think you should rest now...'

But Paulos waved his arm impatiently. 'No, please don't go; that is, unless you have something you have to do. Those medicines are very good, and I'm fully awake. You can hear that even my speech is getting better as I talk...' And indeed it was.

'Right then, I'll stay a bit longer, and tell you what transpired the morning after the Butterfly Man left,' replied André. 'Before I go on, would you like some tea? I have a mug with a spout made for just your condition. And have you any questions?'

Paulos said yes to both; but before he could say more, André had got up and left the room. Shortly after, he heard movements below him as his kindly host prepared tea for them both. Paulos felt more comfortable and relaxed in this man's home than he had been for – for how long? He could not remember. He had grown

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into a life of insularity, worry and stress, nervousness and tension, of his mind dreaming up shadows that he chased in the dark. Here now in this bleak land the very wind was filled with a protective security and harmony, an ease of mind and spirit such as he had never known; or was it André's home? No matter; but it could not last; he would have to leave.

The door opened, and André came in with a tea tray and some plain biscuits. He set the tray down next to the herbs and medications. 'The Butterfly Man said that for a day or two you should drink the mixture he made up, but that you could eat some of these biscuits,' he said lugubriously. 'They're quite pleasant really,' he added, handing Paulos his tea in the mug with a spout, and putting some biscuits next to him.

'You're very hospitable. I assure you I don't need anything more at this stage. Can you tell me how I can get help for my friends on the beach, two children and a blind seaman, the first mate from *The Viking*? They have water, but only some high protein biscuits to live on. How long have I been here? And why is the Butterfly Man so named?'

André laughed. 'Firstly you don't need to worry; everything has been taken care of on the beach, or rather has been transformed and taken care of itself. This is your second day here; I brought you in the evening before last. I will first answer what little I know about the Butterfly Man. Then I'll tell you what I can about the beach and your friends.

'The Butterfly Man is a botanist. Of course, he is a great deal more than that; but no one knows his real name, for he never gives it. However, people who met him frequently saw him with a big butterfly net; so he came to be known as the "Butterfly Man", and that pseudonym has stuck ever since. As to who he is, I only know that he has been in India and that he speaks several languages; that he is the wisest and most erudite man I've ever met, that he knows more about herbs and plants than anyone I've come across or heard about. But above all, he's special; if he's of this Earth, then he is also above it, on plains that few of us can touch, save only in dreams. What else can I say about him? He sees what we do not see; he knows what we do not know, or can only faintly grasp. I once wondered if he had spent time with one

of India's holy men, but for intangible reasons I soon discarded that idea; so unless he reveals much more of himself, I have to be content to know him as he is to me, and doubtless to many others.

'There is one facet of interest about him which almost slipped my mind. Not often do we have people in Patagonia who are truly evil; I mean so utterly evil that they are unable even to see the difference between right and wrong; it has never been known for the Butterfly Man to visit such people. I have never asked him about this, because to do so would be intrusive on my part, but also because the answers are surely obvious.'

Paulos was intrigued; he looked as if he had something to say, but decided otherwise, so André went on.

'Before he left the following morning, the Butterfly Man told me that he expected you to go into a curative sleep, that would last through that day, and very likely the following night. He was right; you did indeed sleep for over twenty-four hours. As I said earlier, after seeing to you, and before we both took a much-needed rest, the Butterfly Man and I talked for a while on all that I had gleaned from your delirious ramblings. As the sun was rising the next morning, he had a simple breakfast, after which he accepted as much fodder for his two donkeys as they could carry, and left. I wonder when I shall see him again,' he said wistfully.

'Before the Butterfly Man came, my mind had been in some turmoil about the underlying mystery that your tragic tale revealed. Later he listened to me, unravelled and simplified the tangle as he saw it, and waved aside my apprehensions.' André looked straight at his patient where he lay, with just a hint of whimsical sadness about his expressive features, though his voice was steady, almost stern.

'So, Father Paulos, I went to your beach. It was not hard to find from all you said; in fact it is well known to me. I go there sometimes, and to other places along the coast, for I find peace and enlightenment on these lonely seashores. You were not to know, but there was no need for you and your friend to climb the cliff; there is an easier route from the north end of the beach, a cleft in the rock, a rough route that reaches up to the summit, but well back from the cliff edge. It's very hard to see, and I only

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found it by chance some years ago.'

While André was speaking, Paulos's mind was beginning to spin as memories trickled back; slowly at first, then in a flood, growing stronger and clearer every minute as one scene after another welled up before his mind's eye. The effect was mixed, for he could not yet accept the reality and import of all that he had seen and experienced. But he listened keenly, seeking some rational explanation from André's words, one that would explain away the persistent anomaly, and would allow him to slip back into the security, if not the comfort, of his old life. He had quite forgotten how he had stood with André just a short while back, the harmony and ease of spirit that he had felt in his home. Now all those memories from so near in time were pushed aside; the cliff, Maitland, the demeaning humiliation he had felt, reared up before him. Paulos knew that his state of mind was irrational, aggravated by his weakness and enforced immobility: he fought it down with some success, and hoped that André had not noticed anything amiss.

But André was acutely observant, and had observed his guest's agitated state. He realised that Paulos's disturbed imagination had leapt ahead of his earlier words, which were in no way meant to be judgmental. He felt sorry for this priest, and the man inside; torn asunder by the routine and safety of a strictly guided life, then launched into a unique and hazardous adventure. But he said nothing, only continued in a steady, even tone of voice, careful not to add or subtract from the illuminating facts as they stood.

'Alive or dead, there was no one on the beach, Paulos; the area was deserted. On my initial search I found no sign of Curtis's body, which I looked for from your random descriptions. The same with Maitland; nothing, either on that beach, or the next beach to the north, or caught anywhere on the crags. Only the bow of your ship, *The Viking*, though heavily battered by the sea, was visible in the dips between waves; more than three-quarters of the hull lay below the surface, resting on a shelving ledge that falls away from the underwater spur she struck. I read her name on the bow, and I must admit that had it not been for the ship being where you said, I think I would have turned around and come home, attributing your story to the wild ramblings of a sick

man. This I say in spite of what the Butterfly Man told me, so greatly was I disenchanted.

‘But I could not forget the blind sailor – Jakes, I think you said – and the two children; especially the children,’ André added, his eyes far away. ‘Those three you left alive on the beach just over twenty-four hours before I got there. So, spurred by this memory, and by what the Butterfly Man had thought, I continued to search. For a good two hours I looked for any evidence that might reveal what had happened. My hunt was not unduly hampered by the weather, which had subsided quite a bit, although it was still fairly windy, with high seas.’

André paused to collect his thoughts, curbing the rising tide of excitement which had begun to run through his veins like fire. ‘And what did I find? Well, I will tell you.

‘As I started from the north end of the beach, criss-crossing between the cliff and the sea, a most curious sensation began to sweep over me: I felt again as I did when I was a child playing in a game of “*Hunt the Treasure*”. I walked one way and felt cold, then another and I was warm. You will understand that this was not in any literal sense; it could only have been through my mind. Anyway, by this guide it was not long before I was led to where they had buried Curtis; but his body was no longer where you had laid it. Nevertheless, I am well used to nature’s signs, so by using my eyes and probing, I noticed that the pebbles had been recently disturbed to a considerable depth, and for the length of a man.

‘You can imagine my excitement; I no longer doubted, and the trails of warmth all about me were tantalising beyond anything I had known. I lost all count of time; it was as though time had never been; even my watch had stopped, and began again on my return! During that day I must have covered every square metre of the beach, led by the warmth and shunned by the cold, picking up wandering thoughts and emotions, from which I could visualise some of the past and much of the present; and all the time light and energy flowed into me.

‘I found and substantiated much of what you rambled on about. I saw where Maitland’s body had fallen; not on your beach, but the next one to the south. I found the spot only because I felt

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drawn that way by a line of heat, even though the core of this warmth went beyond the far end of the beach, beyond the barrier of craggy rocks. For a short time I was puzzled; then I looked up and saw a short spur of rock, jutting out from the cliff and overhanging the crest of the rocky barrier between your beach and the one to the south. I looked more closely at the spur, not more than fifteen or so metres above me, and saw streaks of coagulated blood, most of it washed thin in the misty air, but heavier where it was better sheltered from the elements as it flowed towards the underside of the spur. With some difficulty, I climbed over the craggy barrier to the next beach. I was not really expecting to find Maitland's body, and nor did I; but the shingle on which he had landed had clear indications of having been splayed aside; not only by his fall, but afterwards as he lay there. He must have been terribly injured, but there's little doubt in my mind that your friend had been alive for some hours after his fall from the cliff.

'Then I wonder why he did not call out to Jakes and the children,' put in Paulos.

André looked at him steadily. 'I wasn't there, of course, and nor were you. However, from what you have told me about Maitland, confirmed by what I felt, he must surely have been too severely injured to be moved, and knew it. Then you have the almost impassable barrier between the two beaches: a blind man and two children! What do you suppose they could have done for him? Nothing, even had they been able to reach him, save to give him the comfort of their presence during his dying hours. I think this friend of yours was a man of intelligence, character and courage. I am content to think, or believe if you like, that he knew the odds, and knew the near impossible difficulty of climbing over the natural barrier between the two beaches; but most of all he didn't want to mar in any way the sacrifice he had already made by putting Jakes and the children at any risk or further strains. Would you agree with my impressions and thoughts in this respect?'

Paulos's jealous streak had been aroused. On the other hand he had finer qualities than he would have given himself credit, and he knew that jealousy was one of his biggest faults, so he fought it down, and replied to André's findings and opinions. 'I

think you are almost certainly right. Maitland was a very brave man, and had already sacrificed himself to save the others, and to give me a chance to get help.'

André smiled broadly. 'That was generously spoken,' he replied. 'You see I know well enough how you felt on the cliff, and during your run here: in your delirium your mind was open and many truths poured out,' he added. 'But don't let what I heard concern you; no one will ever know anything from me. More to the point is that you obviously underrate yourself. The Church's teaching on humility can be misleading, and so can create either inflated or deflated egos, disrupting a true sense of self-respect. A balanced outlook is so essential; yet very few have it. Do forgive me for talking in this way, but I was with you for some hours in your delirium before the Butterfly Man came; I could not help hearing and knowing much of your recent trials and tribulations.'

'No, you're right, at least about balance and humility; I like to think that I tend to underrate myself, but in fact this is a fallacy, for my equilibrium swings from one extreme to the other; I'm well aware of my imbalance; away from the religious guidelines of my order, I've found I'm too easily destabilised,' Paulos replied in a self-revealing moment. 'Religious life does not really equip one for the world. It's not easy.'

'The very fact that you can look at yourself so objectively is an excellent foundation. I'm sure you'll do all right. But let's go on with my experiences on the beach,' André said, putting a cap on his previous comments. 'After I'd found the position and place of Maitland's fall, and seen all I needed, I had a hard time scrambling back over the razor-sharp edges, which make up most of the natural barrier between the two beaches, formed from the cliff at that point on the coast; only a blade-running lemur from Madagascar could have crossed this barrier with ease!

'Anyway, when I got back to the beach I made my way to where they had built up their fire. Interesting, for these charred embers on the sand were the only physical sign that any human had been on this beach. On an impulse I sat down close to that spot and, being tired by this time, I must have dozed off. At this point I am not sure if I was asleep and dreamt, or if I was wide

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awake; but I am sure of what I saw, but never heard, for there were only the sounds of nature, such as one would expect with wild seas and gusting winds on a lonely beach in southern Patagonia.

‘Toying dreamily with some of the pebbles which lay partially embedded in the sand, I became aware that the guiding power that had drawn me here and there about the beach was with me, along with those who had swum ashore, relaxing now around the fire which was burning well, casting a flickering light on those about me. I was aware that I knew them all, and much about them. Dusk had fallen. Pietro was sitting cross-legged where I was. Alarmed, I shifted to my right, but none appeared to notice me. Close to him lay Henry Curtis, near to death, with Pietro’s hand in his. To my right was Jim Maitland, then yourself; opposite, while to my left was Bill Jakes with Ruth leaning comfortably against him, her eyes closed.

‘Around Pietro were swirls of subtle light. How else can I describe it? How can I in mere words depict its muted hues and radiance? In all its varying wavelengths it could neither be compared to the light of dusk nor dawn, nor to the light cast from the moon’s cold reflection, or to that of a starlit night. The only observation I can make with certainty is that the light emanated from one person, the boy Pietro; and that the others, yourself too, Paulos, were lightly bathed in its ambience. But no one was conscious of this radiant miracle. It was lovely, beautiful beyond comparison, infinitely complex, yet simple, but created in both pain and peace. In a sense I dreamed that the emanations from all that is, was at least in part reflected there, pure and in a state of perfect balance.’ André gasped in wonder as he spoke and relived what he had seen.

At first Paulos was fascinated, but this soon turned to sceptical interest, and finally to scorn at André’s delusions of this miracle boy – this Pietro, who, with Ruth, came on board *The Viking* at Rio de Janeiro. He was being asked to believe that the bodies of Maitland and Curtis had vanished, just like that; also that Jakes and the children had somehow been spirited away, leaving the beach deserted!

Paulos tried not to let his expression show his scepticism, for

he was interested to know as much as André had to tell; besides he had to be sure that there was no one left on the beach: they must have been taken off by a passing vessel. Paulos's thoughts sped over these loopholes, as he saw them. Then a cunning thought came into his head, so practical that it could undermine André's fairy-tale world. 'Tell me, André,' he said, 'how did you get to the beach, do all you did and saw all you saw, and get back here in one day?'

André gave Paulos a very shrewd look, and said quite calmly, 'You don't believe me. Well, I suppose that's not surprising. What I told you must seem to be very far-fetched. But before you write it off as nonsense, I have two supporting facts to offer, which you should hear before you cast any judgment. But first, the beach to my home. Tell me, have you any idea how long you ran to get here from the cliff, how far you ran; also, how did you find your way?'

'I certainly ran all afternoon, five or six hours. I followed the sun as nearly as I could, and stumbled on this small settlement and your home by chance, and at a point when I could have gone no further. I should tell you that I've done some distance running in my time, and although I started under a handicap from a dislocated shoulder, and having climbed the cliff, I would hazard a guess that I must have covered at least twelve kilometres,' Paulos replied.

'Then,' said André, 'you'll be surprised to hear that your beach is barely seven kilometres from here: something is very wrong with your estimated distance. Firstly, I suggest that in following the sun at this latitude, you omitted to take into account the apparent curvature of the sun's path, which would first have taken you on a slight loop to the south, then levelling out as the sun dropped lower in the sky; but this would only cause a slight discrepancy. For the rest, I think you were too mentally disturbed to judge time, distance and route from the cliff summit to here. You must have lost account of time and strayed south and north.'

Paulos was taken aback. He found it hard to admit that he could be so far wrong, even though he knew he had been made ill from his climb on the cliff, his dislocated shoulder, and his long run to the small settlement and André's house. He thought

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André's account of what he saw and experienced on the beach to be too wild and fanciful to be taken seriously; but André was a kind and perfect host, and he had no wish to hurt his feelings by letting him see his scepticism. However, he asked him if he was quite sure he had not been deluded while on the beach; the wish being father to the thought.

'Not at all; in fact as I told you I nearly turned back after my first hunt around the beach; but then the unanticipated feelings of warmth began to draw me on, which I have already related,' André replied. 'I also told you I had two supporting concrete facts to go some way to substantiate what I told you. The first is the time I got onto the beach, and later when I first began to feel the warm spots that drew me on to find all that I did. I left here at about nine in the morning, got to the cliff about an hour and a quarter later, and on the beach about fifteen minutes after that; it was then around ten thirty by my watch. I felt I had to keep an eye on the time as I was concerned not to leave you for longer than necessary, which is why I was more inclined to "clock-watch" than I normally am. At the end of my first fruitless search, I again glanced at my watch and saw that it was about eleven fifteen. Remember those times, Paulos.

'At the same time, eleven fifteen, I began to feel the draw of the warm spot which led me to where you had interred the body of Henry Curtis, and after that to where Jim Maitland had fallen, and later died. Finally, by some subtle authority, which I cannot explain, I was drawn to the fire around which all of you were seated. You'll know from when you were there, that it's quite impossible, from any point on the beach, not to have seen a group around the fire; yet this happened to me while I was first searching the beach, crossing from end to end, and from the foot of the cliff to the line of surf at its highest sweep. In my first search I must have covered just about every square metre; yet, while in full view from any point on the beach, I had seen neither the fire, nor its embers.

'The relevant point is that during all the time I felt the drawing warmth – I use "time" in a very elastic sense – I was under a spell, a wonderfully magic spell, unaware of the passage of time. It never occurred to me to look at my watch; the only

indication I had as to time was when I sat around the fire with all of you, and it was dusk. What happened afterwards was even stranger: Pietro turned and looked at me. I will never forget that look; his eyes shone, and I knew in that moment that he was not of this world. Brief as it surely must have been, I found myself looking into what I can only describe as the heart of life itself; a matchless blend, yet each part clearly defined, of pain, sorrow, joy and beauty beyond anything I can compare or imagine.

‘The next thing I knew was that I was standing on the summit of the cliff, and I saw that it was no longer dusk, but full daylight; the sun had not yet reached its zenith. I felt no shock or stress, which under the circumstances one would have thought to be natural, bearing in mind all I had seen and experienced, then finding myself on the top of the cliff in the blink of an eye: no, in no time lag at all. It was then that I looked at my watch, which was working perfectly, and saw that the time was still around eleven fifteen.

‘What happened to me was impossible. What I saw and experienced was impossible. The disappearance of two bodies, one buried, the other lying on the shingle, was impossible. Pietro’s power of guidance and physical transference was impossible. The whole thing was impossible, unless one accepts that Pietro Crevelli was not of this world. Once one accepts the wonder of that, then it behoves us to ask “who” and “why”. Broadly speaking, the “who” is clear to me; but I don’t yet know “why”.

‘While I was sitting with the group around the fire on the beach, certain valuable confirming facts, information if you like, were given to me by thought transference of some sort. All I know for certain is that when I sat down with them, I did not know; but when I found myself on the summit of the cliff, I knew. I think it must have been when Pietro looked at me. Two points which I hope might interest you: the first is that when *The Viking* had struck the rock not very far from the beach, and when Captain James Vickery was dying under the tangled wreckage of his bridge, his first mate and friend, William Jakes, was with him in the toxic smoke from the oil and other fires below. I can visualise the scene perfectly. Anyway, Vickery, very near his end,

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struggled to say to Jakes, "That boy Pietro... I don't know all... it's hidden from me, even though I'm dying. There's something about him, something special, something not of this Earth. I feel that Henry Curtis may not live to care for him, the boy alone. Seek out both children; care for them; get them away from this trouble and danger. I know you, Bill; this boy will fill a great need in you. For my sake and yours, do this for me."

'The other information I had was to do with the second mate, Eric Blythe, and two seamen from their ship. This occurred later, I can't say when, but it came about because Blythe and these two men had set out from Rio de Janeiro to find out what had happened to Captain Vickery and his party. They had only travelled for a day, not very far, and were staying the night at an inn close to the sea. During that evening Eric Blythe had a most unusual experience, not dissimilar to my own; and that night both seamen dreamt that they had seen an angel, but could not recognise him as the light that shone around him was too dazzling to see his features. Both the seamen's dreams were identical, and both in their straightforward way knew this being to have been an angel, and said so to Blythe the next morning. Eric's enlightenment had carried him far and shown him much, he was left with a final three-part message:

*"Return in peace to your body and your time.
Here you have seen all you need to know.
Deal wisely with this knowledge."*

'The two seamen's messages were: "Return to Rio de Janeiro; there is nothing to be seen, or needs to be done, to help your shipmates nearest to the sunken *Viking*." As a result of these messages they all agreed to return to Rio de Janeiro.'

André looked steadily at his guest, piercing Paulos's mask with transparent ease, which made him feel uncomfortable and embarrassed, lying prone as he was, unable to walk about and gesticulate and act as a cover to his thoughts. But André withdrew his penetrating gaze, and went on to say, 'I can see that you don't believe much of what I've told you. Don't worry about it; when your spirit is ready, and your mind open, then enlightenment will come in some form or another. I understand that it must all seem

very strange to you, perhaps especially because you are a priest. At any rate it's no fault of yours; your disbelief is honest. However, may I suggest that there are more mysteries in Heaven and on Earth than perhaps you have ever imagined.'

Paulos was silent, his mind in a whirl on hearing André's experiences. His reaction being to discount them as misguided aberrations, his wild imagination being father to the thought – Perhaps even a touch of black magic, he thought in a moment of cynicism. But when he looked at André as he got up to prepare another of the Butterfly Man's medications from the remaining herbs, he saw only a balanced and intelligent man, one who had shown him great kindness and hospitality. Paulos could not possibly say anything that might injure his feelings.

Meanwhile he felt much better. When he was strong enough he must see his Bishop in Rio de Janeiro, and put the whole strange business before him; if only for his own mental stability, his sanity, he had to do this. Yet notwithstanding his apparently whole-hearted disbelief of André's 'out of this world' delusions, there remained a niggling doubt that would not go away, and which must also either be confirmed or laid to rest. One thing he did accept, perhaps too conveniently, was that for some inexplicable reason there was now nobody left on the beach: he was therefore free to leave when he could.

André finished preparing the medications, and the paste to rub on Paulos's chest. There was no acrimony in his manner as he attended to his patient, only a calm and relaxed air, for which Paulos was very relieved. When André had finished, Paulos was pleasantly tired, but before he turned to sleep, he said, 'You should know, André, that I'm immensely grateful to you for your hospitality and help, your kindness and your understanding. I was finished when you found me close to your home, and would surely have died had you not taken me in. However, when I've recovered, I must see my Bishop in Rio about all you have told me.'

'Of course you must; but Rio is a long way from here, and you'll need transportation. A bus can take you to Comodoro Rivadavia up the coast about six hundred kilometres; from there you can catch a daily plane to Buenos Aires, and on to Rio de Janeiro. When I emptied your pockets to wash your clothes, I

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noticed that you have a bank card; with that you can buy your flight ticket at the airport. I'll give you enough money for your bus fare at this end, with some extra for expenses. The Butterfly Man told me that you should be on your feet by tomorrow, and back to normal the day after. Be careful not to strain your shoulder. We'll work on that. I must go now, and you should get some sleep.'

Paulos felt a lot stronger the next morning, so he rose and got dressed in his freshly washed and pressed clothes, before making his way downstairs, where he found breakfast awaiting him; but there was no sign of André, who did not appear until well after noon. Paulos spent the morning walking about exploring the small settlement, and being greeted by several people who asked how he felt; plainly the news of André's house patient had spread abroad. The more he walked, the better he felt, if a little stiff; so it was with quite a spring in his step when he got back, and went through the back door into André's kitchen.

When Paulos came in, André greeted him. 'I'm glad to see you are so much better and stronger; you must have walked quite a distance this morning. I can't help hearing about your general movements. We're a small community, so people naturally take more interest in a stranger than would normally be the case. A couple of people dropped by, curious to know who you are, where you came from, and if you're staying; but they have the true countryman's courtesy, so they never push questions. I told them you were lost and ill when you stumbled on my house, and that you'll be leaving soon. You must be hungry. Come through; lunch is ready.'

Paulos could not help but feel a little embarrassed in André's presence; his warm and kindly manner, his generous hospitality, along with his concern and care for him while he lay sick; but what could he, Paulos, give in return? He could not even accept André's fantastic out of the world experiences on the beach! For the time being at any rate this was an impassable barrier, one on which his Bishop should be able to throw some light; perhaps he would even be open to do more than just listen, and confirm the possible authenticity of André's tale.

These thoughts had crossed Paulos's mind several times the evening before, and again during his morning walk. But he knew that he was just toying with let-out ideas, and that in fact he had no intention even of seeing his Bishop, much less telling him such an incredible story, which had come to him second-hand. He had met his Bishop two or three times, and had been thoroughly intimidated by his forceful manner, his beak of a nose and the piercing eyes under his thick, bushy eyebrows. Paulos even dared to wonder how such an autocratic man would match when set alongside André, or to those he had known on the ship. But these were timid, wayward thoughts, which he quickly brushed aside as being almost heretical.

They sat down to a simple but wholesome meal, during which André guided the conversation around local matters, easily avoiding any reference to his experiences on the beach, or to Paulos's disbelief. However, when they had finished, and were having some Brazilian coffee that André had brought in on an already prepared tray, he turned to his guest and said, 'My friend, regarding my experiences on the beach which you found too far-fetched to accept, I'll repeat again what I said before: *don't let it worry you*. As a priest I can understand very well how your mind must boggle at hearing such a tale, and second-hand at that! Shelve it. Who knows, some day you may feel an urge to take it down, dust it, and review my story. May I suggest that up to now you've tended to stand still, marking time. However, I think that all you've seen and been through during your vacation may initiate changes in some aspects of your outlook, and inspire an urge to review your thinking. At any rate, let the matter rest; at least it's been a pleasure having you here, and to converse with an educated man.'

'The thanks and gratitude should surely come from me,' replied Paulos, relieved at André's reaction.

'Well, thank you for those words. Now we should deal with your health and strength, after which how to get you to Rio de Janeiro. First, do you feel up to having a long day's bus journey from Río Gallegos, near here, to Comodoro Rivadavia and the airport? It's a good six hundred kilometres, with several stops and a break for lunch on the way; you may not get into Comodoro

much before 9 p.m. You can get lodgings quite easily near the bus terminus; just ask the driver. There are two flights a week going as far north as Rio de Janeiro; the plane, a Dakota, leaves at about 9 a.m., and you should have no difficulty getting a seat. There are four main stops en route: Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Porto Alegre and São Paulo; there can be others according to passenger requirements. You must tell me truly if you feel like catching the bus tomorrow morning, and the plane the day after; or would you prefer to leave it and stay on here for another three days? You are, of course, very welcome; only you can say if you're up to it.'

'I feel quite well enough to leave tomorrow. I should be getting back anyway. They've probably heard of *The Viking* going down, and will be wondering what's happened to me. It's very kind of you to find out the travel details for me; I'd be quite lost on my own,' Paulos replied.

'Fine. I've got an old diesel car which I've had for years. If we leave here at 6 a.m., I'll be able to get you to the small bus terminus at Rio Gallegos, which will leave you ample time to get your ticket and catch the bus at seven o'clock.'

André got up and pulled open a drawer on the sideboard behind him, taking out a small packet of pesos which he gave to Paulos; 'There's enough here for your bus ticket, food and drink you'll need on your trip, and for your lodgings at Comodoro Rivadavia. You'll find it's a long and rather dusty journey, so you'll be glad of the fifteen-minute stops en route. Oh, I nearly forgot; I'll give you a packet of sandwiches to take with you in the morning. On the matter of the Butterfly Man's medication, there's enough for one more drink of the herbal medicine he left for you. You don't need the paste any more, but I think you should have that last dose. If you come upstairs I'll mix it up; you should have it right away, for it has a slightly soporific effect, and you need to be awake on time tomorrow morning. I think that's about all,' André concluded, smiling warmly towards his guest.

'You know,' said Paulos, 'until now, I've never come across such ready hospitality, kindness and generosity. Are others like you in this settlement?'

André threw back head and laughed. 'I think most people here are not so dissimilar to myself in this respect. Born of observation

over the years, I have a generalising theory that kindness is not only born within certain people, but is encouraged and brought out by interdependence. Here we have a settlement of about thirty-five people, that is including children. Being so far from any city, we are dependent on each other's abilities and skills, and so on. On the other hand, in heavily populated areas people tend to be more insular, viewing others suspiciously and living within their own social circles. Of course there's more to it than just these generalisations, and there are always exceptions, but I'd rather live here.

'The Butterfly Man once told me that society is like a spearhead – wide at the base, pointed at the tip. Democrats believe you can reshape it; but, as if by magic, it grows back into its original shape again. There will always be kings, and if not kings then dictators. It is the nature of mankind to strive to rise above others, to impose one's will on all. Thank God, we are free of that malady here. By the way, don't try and repay the pesos; regard them as a gift, to yourself or for your Church if you wish.'

Everything went as André had prepared, and the following morning they drove on a bumpy track to the main road, and on to the bus terminus. Paulos could not find the right words to say as André pressed a packet of sandwiches and some fruit into his hands. He felt a great surge of warmth towards this man who had taken him in, nursed him, washed his clothes, done so much, and organised so much for him. He wanted to say how sorry he was that he was unable to accept as true his friend's wonderful experiences on the beach; but André knew this, and Paulos could not lie.

However, as the bus drew away, the blinkers that had until then obscured Paulos's sight and comprehension fell away. He got up and worked his way down the barely half-full bus to the long back seat, on which he knelt like a child, peering through the window to catch a sight of André: he wanted to tell him of his change of heart, of how he had been such a blind fool. He caught a glimpse of his host, and waved, but it was only for a moment, for as the bus gathered speed it drew up a cloud of dust behind it that

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completely obscured his view. He felt lost as he left André's home behind. He had his address in his pocket, and he would write to him when he got to Rio de Janeiro, or perhaps at Comodoro Rivadavia. He must tell him how he, André, had changed his narrow life, opened up new and exciting vistas of reality and truth. He had wanted to believe all along; even at the time he had felt that André's experiences had been faithfully told; but his stubbornness, his stupid narrow-minded stubbornness had blocked his acceptance.

Paulos wished now that he had accepted André's invitation to stay a bit longer. But he would write; oh yes, he would write at length to one of the wisest, and certainly the most generous man he had ever met – André Canill.

When the bus carrying Paulos had left, André watched as it pulled out onto the highway, dragging behind it a thick train of dust as it sped into the distance, dust that blew towards the west in the almost unceasing winds that raged across this land. He hoped he had not let Paulos down; somehow this was very important.

Much later in the day, as the sun dipped below the horizon, there came a knock on André's front door. Its resonance and pattern were distinctly familiar, but disturbing. He rose to answer it.

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With tendrils of apprehension whispering in his mind, André opened the front door. In the half-light he stood transfixed; for there, standing quietly before him, was an old and slightly dishevelled man. André knew it was him – the Butterfly Man! Even so, the impact of seeing him in such poor state was so sharp that for a moment he was stunned.

In the brief silence that followed, his tangled thoughts scrambled about, reaching out to the man whom he had known for many years as an independent master of his life; a man who radiated an inner composure, with an uplifting presence and a gentle unoppressive dominance, which together invariably drew forth respect, tinged with a certain awe from those he met; while his telepathic powers and eccentric way of life had created about him an ever-widening aura of mystery. However, his outstanding qualities were his many unspoken acts of kindness over the years, along with his wide knowledge of herbs and their medical usage. Taken all together, these and other qualities came together to form a remarkable and unique character. But now there stood before André a broken old man, stripped temporarily of his personality and magnetic powers; in that moment André's great heart reached out to him.

'Come in, my friend, come in; you look all in!' As he spoke, he took the Butterfly Man by the arm and led him unresisting into the warmth of his home, and to his most comfortable chair, into which he almost slumped in his exhaustion.

André stood and looked down at his almost revered friend, unsure what to do or say in this strange and staggering reversal in his guest. But the warm-hearted host in him rose up almost immediately. 'Can I get you anything to eat and drink? Where are your donkeys and your companion? I'd better see to the donkeys.'

The Butterfly Man lifted his head, which was starting to

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droop. 'Thank you, André,' he said slowly. 'I knew I could turn to you. I'd like a glass of water. I've only got one donkey with me, and I took the liberty of putting her into your small barn with some hay. I left the other donkey with my chela in the foothills of the Lago Argentino a few days ago. Let me have fifteen minutes' rest here; then I'll be able to talk to you. It is not so much my body that is weary, but my mind and spirit have had some startling shocks.'

'Take as long as you like,' André replied, turning to get the glass of water. This was drunk down thirstily, after which André caught the glass before it fell to the floor from the Butterfly Man's grasp as he slipped into oblivion.

Filled with sympathy and concern, André gazed at his wise old friend as he lay asleep in his best chair. He turned to switch off the main light, leaving only two soft wall lamps which together cast a gentle ambience around the room. I think you'll need much more than fifteen minutes to recover, he told himself. Poor old fellow... now you need help, though Heaven knows what threw you into this state; perhaps you'll tell me in due course. At least you've come to the right home.

André turned, closed the door quietly, and went into his kitchen to finish preparing and cooking a thick vegetable soup; some he would have, and there would be plenty for the Butterfly Man when he awoke. He wondered yet again about his real name, about his past, and what had led him to be a wanderer and herbal doctor.

But the Butterfly Man was no ordinary mortal, for André heard him stirring next door after almost exactly fifteen minutes. He went through to find his friend rising from the chair in which he had been enjoying the sleep of apparent exhaustion. He appeared better; frail, but in control of himself. While being far from fully recovered, this was a miraculous change to have made in so short a time.

André stepped forward to offer help, but by a gesture the Butterfly Man made it plain that he would prefer to manage on his own.

'You should have something to eat,' said André. 'I've got some good soup ready, bread and cheese, with coffee or tea afterwards.'

By the way, as you're now a full guest in my home, how would you like me to address you? It seems a bit ridiculous to call you "the Butterfly Man" – at least within these four walls.'

André was rewarded with one of the Butterfly Man's illuminating smiles. 'My name is Pickering, Hugh Pickering; just use my Christian name; but please, only in your home. Don't worry about me; I'll find myself again.'

After that they both sat down at the table, and André was delighted to see the normally abstemious 'Hugh' consume two plates of his soup, before having some bread and cheese, flanked by a steaming mug of tea. After which André left him to prepare the bed in his spare room, the same that had so recently been vacated by Paulos.

That done, he went downstairs again to find Hugh dozing lightly in the same chair. He woke instantly when he heard André's footsteps. 'I'm sorry, André; I fear I was beginning to drop off again.'

But this time André was quite firm. 'Look, Hugh; you're the patient now, and I really think you should have a good night's rest. We can talk tomorrow. There's no point in pushing yourself any further. You know how to find my spare room with the bathroom next door. Everything's laid out for you. Call me any time if you need anything. I'll see you in the morning for breakfast.'

Hugh nodded and smiled whimsically. 'I have been through some extraordinary experiences, which have taken rather a lot out of me; yet without any questions you have made me very welcome.'

'It's the least I can do,' André replied, 'a drop in the ocean compared to what you have done for others over the years.'

Early the next morning, before Hugh had come downstairs, André went outside to his small barn and fed and watered the donkey; he then picked up the bag of herbs which, uncharacteristically, Hugh had left on the ground in the loose straw. He knew that in his weakened state he must keep the donkey out of sight, away from any chance eyes. When he got back he found Hugh waiting in the kitchen, looking very much

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better for his night's rest; but there was a haunted look about his eyes which had escaped André's attention the night before, due no doubt to his guest's physical exhaustion. The sharp edge of weariness had passed, but Hugh's eyes could not lie when they told of mental shock and anguish, past and present. André found it hard not to show a very deep concern for his friend, and just hoped that in the coming days he might be able to help.

André's earlier life was quite unknown to his neighbours living in this hamlet; they were simple folk, and a simplified version of his past had been sufficient. But he had suffered physical and mental pain and loss, about which Hugh alone knew; little wonder that Hugh had chosen to turn to him in his hour of need.

There was ample land around this hamlet to build homes, farm or support livestock. André had no wish and no need to farm, as he had other responsibilities and pursuits; but he had built his house on about a hectare of land, and with his wife had created an unusually beautiful and wonderfully balanced garden at the back, with a hut at its far end sheltering a curved bench seat open towards the house. This carefully developed plot of land supported vegetables, fruit trees, grasses and flower beds; its layout was such as to blend the changing colours as one season flowed naturally into the next, resulting in a finely balanced dream, a combination of grace and productivity.

To protect his garden from the harsh winds that sprang up so quickly in this part of the world, André had surrounded it with a double bank of wattle trees, cut and kept to a height of about five to six metres; he had expected these fast-growing trees would also give both of them a measure of privacy. His dual experiment was even more successful than he had hoped, and when the trees had reached a height when they had to be cut back, scenting the air in its season with fragrant mimosa, the double bank began to thicken out, becoming almost impenetrable to the eye. Others who had long since staked out land for their farms, followed suit, and wattle trees, an Australian legume that thrived in their poor soil, became widespread around much of the comparatively sheltered land thereabouts, acting as quite effective windbreaks.

Hugh had wandered in this garden before, and had always

loved its peace and tranquillity. Now, together, they roamed around this miniature paradise, while André pointed out new features that he had put in since Hugh had last strolled in it.

‘I wish I had a stream meandering through the garden,’ André mused, ‘but running water is not plentiful around here. However, when I have the time, I’d like to build a pond, near where you’re standing, I think; even stock it with some fish!’ He laughed at his little dreams, chatting on easily about this and that, while watching Hugh’s mental and physical tensions gradually dissolve in this haven of peace.

Hugh turned to André and said with feeling, ‘You have a rare talent, for you have not only created a mixed garden, but one of true harmony. It was shrewd of you to suggest I walk around it with you; I feel in better balance, more composed in myself. I would like to tell you of my recent experiences. Shall we go and sit in your delightful arbour?’

André gladly agreed, and they walked towards the open shed and sat down; the semicircular bench made it easily possible to face each other, while between them was a simple garden table.

‘Before you start,’ said André, ‘let me get us some light liquid refreshments, and some garden cushions which one of my sewing neighbours made for me to fit this bench. Unless one sits here for only a short spell, this seat can feel hard and uncomfortable.’

Without waiting for Hugh to respond, André got up and went back to the house to collect the cushions and get some fruit juice.

Hugh did not protest at André’s kindness, and the trouble he was going to on his behalf. Age and weariness were sapping his vitality. He remembered, as always, the tortured time of shock and loss from all he knew and loved most dearly, followed by many years of study and wandering over the lonely steppes of Patagonia. While fleeing from himself, he took to practising meditation, from which he gained some peace of mind, some escape from the loneliness that was always lying in wait; but with it came the gift of telepathy, so that he was able to pick up and absorb the thoughts and needs of others. This gift, along with his wide knowledge of herbs and medicine, gave him a much needed outlet and purpose to what remained of his life; and the many years that followed were like a cocktail of fulfilment and resignation.

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Then, while pursuing an inner call, his almost routine pattern of life had exploded in an unexpected and miraculous way with his release, reinstatement and reassurance from... from whom? He was not sure. He needed to talk to André, unburden himself – if he would accept. All the knowledge he had gained, his gifts and beliefs, having been put on trial, were now as nothing; or so he felt. André was a balanced man, one who had also known loss and pain, but who had emerged the finer and stronger, better than himself... For a moment Hugh chuckled wryly at the drift of his thoughts. Who knew him? Who would have guessed? The Butterfly Man; the enigma; the man of mystery! The man with feet of clay!

At that moment, Hugh's thoughts were broken into by the arrival of André with seat and backrest cushions under one arm, while holding a tray with cool drinks and glasses on the other. He made Hugh comfortable, poured out two glasses of orange and lemon juice, then sat down himself. The day was perfect, with a gentle breeze that fluffed up some dry leaves, sending them rustling past the arbour, while high above thin skeins of cloud glided by, serving to filter the sun's piercing rays.

Hugh leant forward. 'André, I think it's important I tell you what happened to me on the second day after leaving you, for I believe it ties in with your own experiences, and what you learned from Paulos while he was here. Then, if you'll accept it, I'd like to tell you about myself; where, when, how and what happened to me and mine many years ago; events so terrible to me that afterwards, having nothing left to live for, I felt driven to wander in the wilderness, here in Patagonia. So you see, this is in two parts; the first will certainly interest you. On the second I feel that you should give me permission to tell you, for it is about myself and my wife, another life of great joy, but memories now which have become a lonely burden to me; but they're none of yours, and I have no wish that you should feel their weight.'

André observed the dual notes of dignity and pathos underlying Hugh's words, even a hint of pleading. He knew that Hugh had been through some wonder or shock only a day ago, and that his defences were down, showing more of his humanity and sensitivity that André had always known were there. He

looked straight at Hugh and said, 'My friend, you do me an honour, both in coming to me in your trouble, and now in wishing to confide your past in me. No one shall learn from me anything of your past, unless you wish it. One thing, I get the impression that you genuinely underrate yourself; but I'll say no more on that for the time being. Over to you, Hugh; tell me whatever you wish.'

Hugh looked relieved. 'Thank you,' he said simply. 'As you know, when I left you I wandered rather aimlessly towards the foothills of the Lago Argentino; something was troubling me, but I wasn't sure what. I felt I was walking in a vacuum, walking towards a critical stage in my destiny, perhaps in the form of the boy, Pietro? I had to go to the beach. You must understand that during my many years of wandering I had long since accepted my state as being final for the rest of my time on this Earth, hence my slowness in seeing and accepting that such might not be the case; I had forgotten that nothing stands still, and that time with its crooked stride can take one down strange and unpremeditated paths.

'At any rate, the next morning I started back, leaving my chela and a donkey with enough to live on for at least a week. He'll be there when I return, for he's a very reliable young fellow. I skirted your settlement early on the third day and made my way towards the beach you told me about.

'However, I did not get very far, perhaps three kilometres from your house, when I saw coming towards me from the east, the coast, a boy. As he drew closer I became aware that he was no ordinary boy, for while he walked towards me I saw that he appeared to be gliding, his feet never stirred the coarse grass on which he walked. Then, around him, or perhaps emanating from him, there was a gentle radiance, unlike any earthly light. Very hard to explain, for there is little by which I can make a comparison. I remembered your description of Pietro, and I saw that this radiant boy was the same Pietro that Paulos knew, and whom you saw on the beach; the same, yet not in the same state, for the Pietro who came towards me was not on this Earth!

'He stood in front of me, and as his radiance touched me, he smiled and took my hand. In a flash all tangible substance about

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me dissolved, and I felt myself falling though time and space, the lost years slipping by, fleeing past moments, riding the winds of dreams, of reality, towards that wonderful and terrible time of awakening, which I knew then I would have to relive from the past. So much flashed through my mind; but above all, before I could move on from this world, I had to first overcome my fear and hesitation at that time: then only would I be free and able to see the past and the present in true perspective, without the distorting sting of bitterness and pain that has dogged me through my long years of wandering.

‘These years have borne with them a spectre to haunt me, in spite of the help and healing I have been able to give here in Patagonia, which I hoped would go some way to counterbalance my earlier failure; in fact I think to some extent my life here did help, otherwise why should I be given a second chance, a chance to erase that past. I tell you frankly, André, that day after day I have felt stunted, destined to wander on the fringes of life, cut off from whatever path I should otherwise have followed, changed from the type of person I should have been; rather like marking time on the same spot, or being caught in a whirlpool. Well, I did relive those terrible hours; first as they had been, then again after these punishing years in the wilderness of my soul; yet I have no memory of both, only the one that I lived with success.’

Hugh broke off, and looked directly at André. ‘Does this jumble make any sense to you? It’s not easy to explain events and impressions that are not only personal to oneself, but move beyond our normal dimensional limitations.’

‘Indeed, you make good sense from what would normally touch on the almost inexplicable,’ replied André. ‘On the other hand, I have the advantage of having been through some extraordinary experiences myself: those on the beach while Paulos still lay asleep and recovering. To me, a salient difference between my contact with Pietro and yours, was that I saw him in the flesh and one with others in the world; but I believe you met him as he was leaving, which may be a curious way to put it. I like to think that perhaps you were his last port of call. By the way, Hugh, who or what do you think he was?’

‘As I understand it, an angel,’ replied Hugh simply.

‘Then we are of the same view; and in one way or another we have both been blessed. I wonder what happened to both Ruth and Jakes, for with Pietro they were the last people remaining on the beach.’ André mused over this rhetorical question. ‘But I think you want to tell me of your past, at least that part of it which has been weighing on you.’

Hugh then launched very briefly into his past, which led to two tragedies that had such a terrible impact on him, and which at least brought him to abandon his previous way of life. His reaction was to get away and travel by any means available, with few plans or routes in his head, as he vainly sought to come to terms with his shattered life. This he did by sea and by land, until his wandering took him into Patagonia, where he found that his basic skills as a herbalist were welcomed... He stayed, and moved about the region, all the time studying, collecting herbs and increasing his knowledge, until what had been an interest in his spare time became his full-time concern. As far as possible, this partly filled his occupational need, and that of being of increasing use to a widely scattered people.

‘I should give you as some foundation a few relevant facts about my earlier life and shortly after. I was born in the Far East of English and Scottish parentage; schooled in England during the war, and gained qualifications as a geologist and land surveyor afterwards. I had long since had Africa in mind as a continent in which I would like to work and settle, where, having sufficient qualifications, I began to pluck the fruits of my earlier forays into suitable work possibilities on contract. I have always loved some of the emptier, less explored parts of the world; there people are usually simple, close to the land, often friendly, honest and welcoming. Of course there are stark exceptions, but these tend to be of a regional nature.

‘There are also some outstandingly beautiful parts that one often comes across almost by accident; in those early years after the last war many of these were virtually untouched. In the course of several years I changed my work venues several times, and so was able to move from south to north of Eastern Africa. In each place I moved to I sought out those lesser known regions in my spare time; many were striking in their grandeur; others more

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compact, but the background was usually on a grand scale. The whole concept of beauty when compared to Britain or Europe was quite different – vaster, sweeping, but with unexpected pockets of beauty, often in miniature.

‘Whatever Britain has to offer is never far, on a smaller scale, not just in size, pretty rather than magnificent and striking, but often hard and frustrating to reach due to the great crowds. Africa is very different, in that most of the continent could be described as having vast stretches of uninspiring semi-desert; but there are also large regions of wild and striking country, and then, occasionally, one comes across a gem with its own spirit, its own mysterious life – I have written about one such in the far south of Tanganyika, with another in the north of that country. Good or bad, no two are alike, either to be in, or in their atmospheres.

‘Forgive me, André; I’m going off at a tangent. I have not spoken freely to anyone in many years; fruitlessly, I’ve even striven to thrust back my own memories. Now, having met with Pietro, it is different... I first went to Africa under contract to a large British organisation, which was planting huge estates with black wattle in the Southern Highlands of Tanganyika. There were eight such estates when I arrived, but as well as these original estates, they were extending and planting in the huge tracts of land around. Of course, a considerable amount of machinery was needed to keep these estates running, so at their HQ in Kibena, they had offices and a large and comprehensive workshop; away from these was a neatly spread out row of staff houses, with a larger residence for the General Manager.

‘The workshop manager was an Italian, Giovanni d’Aquino, a kind and very able man. Years before he had married Helen, an English girl, and she in due course gave birth to Francesca, who arrived for nearly three months while I was there, it being her summer break from university, where she was studying. She was quite lovely, with eyes that sparkled like dewdrops in the dawn sunlight; but how can I describe her further, as I am deeply prejudiced! I’ll try to draw you a picture of sorts. In spite of her Italian father, Francesca had a fair skin and deep blue expressive eyes, mid-brown hair that was, well, just right. To me, she was perfectly built, compact, a little less than average height, light and

slim, but stronger than she appeared. However, I don't think this poor description does her justice, for her true beauty lay in her sweetness of nature, her sparkle and vivacity; with changing hues these reflected her inner emotions and thoughts, of joy and sorrows: Francesca's beauty shone through her eyes, the very mirror of her soul.

'Of course it was not long before she drew amorous attentions from most of the young blades from the estates, myself among them. However, our times in Kibena were limited and sporadic due to work and the considerable distances from estates into the central HQ; I was fortunate in being only seven miles away, but others were further, some over twenty miles.

'What can I say! In spite of her being besieged from time to time with suitors from the true and sincere, to seducers from those with less honourable intentions, Francesca and I were drawn to each other from the first; like a bee to a blossom we were made to be one, a perfect match. Those long evenings and weekends of courtship were like Heaven on Earth; we were lost to love and to each other, a state that very soon became obvious to all, so that other suitors fell away, to bewail their misfortune at a distance, or in the Kibena Club bar.

'But I must not use up too much of your time, André, trying to express what was the start of the most glorious time of my life; a lifetime of wonder burned into me for my time on this Earth and, I hope and pray, in my life hereafter.'

'Please don't concern yourself about my time,' André broke in. 'Your past is fascinating; in any case, my time and any help I can give are at your disposal.'

Hugh was plainly touched by these warm and gracious words from his friend. 'Thank you, André; I admit that after years of virtual silence, and my recent encounter with Pietro, my whole life and outlook have been revitalised, and I do need to talk to you. However, there's no point in my drawing it out any longer than it need be. Francesca's parents, Helen and Giovanni, were delighted for their daughter and myself. The problem of breaking off her university course fell away, for she had only enrolled two terms before, and she could, if she wished, take a postal degree covering similar subjects from either of two universities in

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England or South Africa. However, at that time, and until the last, the world was well lost for love, and she showed little interest in picking up her academic studies where she had left off, or of starting afresh at some later date.

‘About two months later Francesca and I were married at a Catholic mission station in the hills towards Lake Nyasa (Malawi). It was small and rough, but the three mission priests were overwhelmed at a wedding in their little church, and by the dozen or so guests who could be there for the occasion. The mission station was a good distance from Njombe, and for most of the way the road was little more than a cart track, and with work having to go on, not many people from the Company could get away; but this made little difference to Francesca and myself, and the simple wedding ceremony went off marvellously, with numbers being more than made up by at least thirty uninvited, but welcome, African parishioners. This was something that I and the two priests in residence had anticipated, so the wedding party brought ample supplies to suit most tastes, and everyone there had a good time.

‘My own contract with the Company had only about a month to go before I would be due four months’ leave. The GM would have released me almost immediately, but this would cause estate staffing problems, so we decided to decline his kindly offer until a young man from England, due in about two weeks, had arrived and settled in. In fact we stayed a full month before we left, after which we drove about seven hundred miles north to Arusha on the Great North Road, much of which was through semi-desert, sparsely populated, and most of the road dusty, corrugated murram.

‘We stopped in the late afternoons at both Iringa and Dodoma, arriving late at Arusha on the evening of the third day; a small but attractive leafy town in the shadow of Mount Meru. Arusha was known for being the halfway post between Cairo and Cape Town, first marked as such by Colonel Grogan, who had walked between these two cities from north to south in the early twentieth century. Francesca had only been within ninety miles of Njombe in the Southern Highlands, so she was excited and intrigued after having passed through much of the barren

heartland of Tanganyika, which then climbed slightly, changing gradually to a marginally lusher north.

‘We booked into Arusha’s only hotel for ten days, thrilled and in love with every moment that came and went. One day we drove east to Moshi, stopping en route to take in the splendour of Mount Kilimanjaro, which at times appeared to be suspended in space, towering above the plains of golden lions and dry yellow grass. This region of Tanganyika was very different to the Southern Highlands we had left behind us. Here there roamed a wide diversity of game animals, living amidst the rusty colours and the dry tang of burning wood, smells reminiscent of this region; a bland and languid air thrummed quietly in this heart of the continent, for Africa’s vastness has a variety of moods and rhythms.

‘Fortune smiled on us in Moshi, when by chance we met an elderly American; he was plainly very taken with Francesca, so with one thing after another, we were offered the hospitality of his home, and a personally guided tour round one of his coffee estates. I learned that coffee in all its stages of growth, pruning and processing, called for far more skill than growing wattle, and my interest was aroused. By mid-afternoon this led him to offer me a post on one of his six estates at Oldeani. He was as good as his word, and when we got back to his house he wrote me a letter of introduction to his General Manager there. It had been a wonderful day, during which I had hopefully gained a rewarding and more interesting work life: a good omen for our future.

‘We spent the next day in a leisurely manner, revelling in each other’s company, and enjoying those of others whom we met; for all the world loves a lover. We wandered about Arusha and lazed in the hotel swimming pool. That evening we let the hotel manager know that we would be away for two nights at least. The following morning, with Oldeani and more distant horizons in mind, we turned west for a good many miles before climbing the Great Rift Valley, and on past the famous Ngorogoro Crater, where we had booked into one of their safari lodges on the crater’s rim.

‘Francesca was carrying my letter of introduction in her pocket; so we pressed on to Oldeani, another cratered mountain adjoining Ngorogoro, lesser known and smaller in girth, but

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higher and wilder. For some way round its lower slopes, and stretching high up to the forest line, were a number of privately owned coffee estates straddling the ridges, six of which belonged to our wealthy host in Moshi. We sought out the General Manager, to whom I introduced myself; but my letter of introduction brought only a courteous smile, for he already knew of my pending arrival, as the two distant areas of the American's eight estates were in daily contact by radio.

'Anyway, André, my luck was in as they needed an Assistant Manager on one of their estates, and with my introductory recommendation from their American chief, I was offered the vacancy. Francesca was such an attractive girl, so irresistibly full of sparkling life, that I'm inclined to think my success owed as much to her enchantment as to my potential abilities.

'It wasn't much of a honeymoon for Francesca: a long drive, ten days in Arusha, of which more than two were in effect taken up in my chasing employment; but both her parents had grown together working and making the best of their lives, so this to my dearest Francesca was better than the best, and to her I was the finest and most wonderful man she had ever met – or ever wanted to meet! I blush to say these words, but they are drawn from many of hers; indeed, during the nearly ten years that followed our love for each other only grew richer and deeper. I've seen many married couples in my time, some little more than marriages of convenience, others that start bright but which grow dim with the passing years; only very rarely have I come across one such as ours, in which the couple are linked as a living vibrant one, in which division would have been unthinkable.

'At any rate, André, we went back to the Arusha Hotel, packed and collected our belongings, bade farewell to our ten glorious days, our honeymoon, and drove back to Oldeani and a bungalow on Jeep Ridge, on their number one estate. The furnishings were simple, but with what we had it soon became a warm and inviting home.

'It was not long before my knowledge and skills in surveying, along with other abilities I had picked up, were put to use in routing an inter-estates telephone line, working through thick bush for most of the time. I was also busy on the coffee estate itself, then more surveying for roads and water pipelines from the

forest directly above us. But I could go on and on with our time around Oldeani and the Ngorogoro. Life was like a brilliant jewel. After about six months I was moved as Manager to their number two estate. In all we lived and worked with this American corporation for less than four years, when we learned that the owner, our old American friend in Moshi, had died: his eight coffee estates were to be sold off and the corporation dissolved. This breaking up of a sound business venture came about because he owed several million US dollars in tax in America. Apparently, they couldn't touch him while he worked his businesses in East Africa, but it would have been quite another matter if he had moved back to America, or when he died: then both State and Federal tax vultures could move in and carve up his empire. So another change became necessary.

'We were not well off, so it was important that I get another job with the least possible delay. Due to the old American's estates being put up for sale, there was a temporary glut of coffee estate managers, but the offer arose to manage a huge pyrethrum estate high on West Kilimanjaro. It was owned jointly by three senior RAF pilots from the last war, all of whom had their own lush farms on the lower slopes on rich land of deep volcanic soil. I was not happy with the set-up, which I viewed only as a stop-gap until a coffee estate post arose in Kenya. During my first month on this estate, my doubts as to its suitability became certainties.

'Just briefly, André, I'll skim over some of the major impossibilities, and why I was the thirteenth or fourteenth manager – which I did not know when I accepted the job. In that rich soil pyrethrum grew fast, and the flowers needed to be picked at least every week; this called for a very large workforce, and I saw on the books that I had between 450 and 500 working men and women, which was far more than I'd been used to. But that was only the beginning of the trouble, for with claims on workers on an adjoining smaller pyrethrum estate, along with the farms on the lower slopes, I found that the estate was contracting workers from three adjoining countries, one being the difficult Burundi. The campsite was terrible, and the huts and facilities the worst I'd ever seen. With the altitude of about 2,500 metres, the cold and damp at night had to be lived in to be believed.

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‘These factors alone led to an unhappy and dissatisfied workforce, and with it a certain amount of cannibalism! There were other problems too, but the overwhelming one was always that of the sheer numbers of people living in the camp; I had no check on exactly how many, but with wives, children and hangers-on, I reckoned that the camp was housing up to three thousand people at any one time. I should add that by negotiation and diplomacy I managed to overcome most of the human problems during my first month or two. However, I knew very well that it could not last; there was a complete lack of cooperation from the directors to improve facilities; in fact their ideas on how to treat their workers were violent and wholly contrary to my own.

‘We made the best of it for nine months, and even Francesca’s sparkle began to wane as she watched my own health deteriorate. Then we had a wonderful surprise in the form of an offer from an English company, to manage one of their coffee estates in Ruiru, Kenya, while their manager was on long leave. It was the chance I had been hoping for, and I promptly accepted. The estate and the house were like a dream come true; my health and state of mind, and Francesca’s spirits, recovered rapidly. We longed to stay there after the agreed nine months, or at least on another of the company’s estates; but this was not to be, for independence (*Uhuru*) was not far off; and since coffee was Kenya’s richest source of income, companies were consolidating, and private owners were clamping down on their costs, anticipating the possibility of takeovers.

‘Nine months later after the regular manager had returned, I did manage another privately owned coffee estate in the same area, from which the owner was away in Mombassa much of the time, building up and organising his fleet of deep-sea rod-and-line fishing boats. He gave most of his attention to “K” Boats, which was a becoming an increasingly profitable venture. But, my patient friend, I’m wandering too long over some of the best and more memorable times in my young life, shying away from the painful crises which were to come, destined eventually to cast my life into darkness.’

‘Not at all,’ André replied, having listened keenly to Hugh’s

unfolding story. 'You're giving me a brief but truly fascinating background. With every darkness there is light; some start with the darkness and emerge later into light. Yours has been harder, for to have a short span in the glorious light, followed by being plunged into darkness for the greater part of your life is hard indeed; becoming fearful as your inner vision blurs, making it harder to recall the face and looks of a loved one, even the sound of her voice.

'Buddhists hold that a span of five years is time enough to wipe the keenest edge from any person's memory; I don't agree, for men of your calibre can tap deep into the subconscious, and your love, and your memory of love, remain with you as long as you live. You may not be able to hear the tones in Francesca's voice, nor clearly distinguish her features; but your memory of her, and of most of the places and incidents when you were together, are just as sharp – they never die, just as true love never dies.

'I'll tell you something else, Hugh: when you came downstairs this morning, I had the clear impression that you had reached, and passed, the most brilliant but hardest stage in your life, and that ahead of you there is light; it cannot be the same light you were in before, for your youth has passed; and your Francesca has, I think, left this world, and is waiting for you.'

Hugh was deeply moved by André's penetrating words, and for a moment was silent, before replying. 'You're very perceptive, André, and wise too. I almost wish we had spoken before, but neither events nor the time was right. Even so, I must move on faster to the crises which were to come.

'While Francesca and I were on Glenlee coffee estate in Ruiru, we had a letter from her parents, Giovanni and Helen, telling us that they were leaving the Wattle Corporation at the end of his current contract, and returning to Salerno, in Italy, a little south of Naples. Giovanni had been saving for years to buy a bungalow there, along with a vacant garage nearby. For some time his health had been steadily declining, which concerned us both, for he was barely fifty years of age. Unknown to us at the time, he had been sent by the Corporation to their HQ in Nairobi to see a certain specialist. Even on Giovanni's return to Kibena, he had insisted

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that Francesca and I were not told any worrying details, for he did not wish to burden us with his problems. He had also insisted on working out the full time on his contract, so as not to risk any reduction in his pension: he knew that pensions were worked out and finalised in their London offices, far from the Southern Highlands, and feared lest they were coldly meticulous and exactingly ungenerous in their arithmetical calculations, which was a risk he was not prepared to take.

‘Knowing her father well, Francesca was puzzled and worried at their decision, spurred by the fact that her father had been to Nairobi for medical attention. Why was she not told? We were less than forty miles from Nairobi! It seemed very odd. However, it was Helen, Francesca’s mother, who had penned the letter in such a way, and with such reasoning, that her daughter’s fears were partially allayed; a state of mind which under the circumstances I encouraged.

Two months later, Giovanni and Helen left Kibena, flying from São Hill (their nearest airstrip ninety miles from Kibena) to Nairobi. They stayed for nearly a week, living as guests of the Corporation in one of the best hotels in Nairobi. During this time we saw them frequently, and were relieved to see how well Giovanni looked; we had been concerned when he had been flown to Nairobi earlier to see a specialist – but not us! From either of them, attempts to find out what had been wrong were met with statements, such as, “Nothing to worry about; gastric problem; cleared up now; brilliant specialist.” I was not happy with these glossed-over replies, but said nothing. Giovanni was lent a car by their Nairobi office, and they spent half of most days with us on the estate, while on several occasions we drove into Nairobi to have dinner with them.

‘But the reunion could not last, and all too soon the day came when they had to catch their flight to Rome. We took them to the airport on a bright and sparkling morning, and there at last we bade our farewells, watching from the observation bay as their plane took off, powering its way in a steep climb. I remember – oh, how well I remember – Francesca’s tear-wet cheeks, and my heart breaking at the sight of her sorrow. We watched until the plane was out of sight, and all the time her hand was held tightly

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in mine, and somehow, or why, the words in our lovely marriage ceremony floated into my mind: *For richer for poorer, in sickness and in health... till death us do part*; I trembled at the last five words. Dear God, I thought, not even death must part us... Never let us be parted; we are one!

Thirteen:
Tangled Tales from the West

Hugh was becoming distressed as his memory drew on scenes that touched him to his core; seeing this, André seized that moment to break into his discourse. 'I think you should take a break, Hugh. It's getting on for one o'clock; I suggest we go back to the house and get a bite to eat. I've also got some very reasonable wine. Afterwards we can bring coffee out here and you can go on.'

For a moment Hugh look slightly dazed, as though drawn from a living dream, which was indeed the case; so much so that he appeared to have left his perceptibility aside, showing no signs of being on the receiving end of a kindly subterfuge.

'You are the perfect host, André; but as you mention it, I am a little peckish. The morning has passed quickly; anyway, it's just as well; the tenor of what is left becomes hazardous and tragic. But that aside, I do hope I'm not laying burdens on your shoulders; I'd feel very embarrassed if I thought that to be the case.'

'Come on, my friend,' replied André firmly, 'you know better than to ask that old question again: I want to hear your story, and to be of help if it is within my power.'

Hugh rose to his feet. 'You already have,' he replied, 'just by listening, and being the sort of man you are. But come; I've this afternoon to finish my tale; I should be off tomorrow, or my chela will be like a lost sheep, and not know what to do.'

They had a light lunch together, with a white Brazilian wine; after which André collected up a fresh tray of coffee, and some general refreshments if needed; with Hugh he carried these to his arbour at the far end of the garden.

'Yes, I remember very clearly all we did and felt in the few years Francesca and I were together; but that final scene at the airport, the thoughts and feelings that flowed between us were, well,

rather like a shudder in time, a before and after. I can't say why, but I had a strong premonition while watching her parents' plane race down the runway, before soaring steeply into the blue sky, that events from the time we were at the airport were to be a pivotal point in our destinies. When the plane was out of sight, and our minds both near and far away, we drove back to the estate. Francesca was silent, her arm tucked against my side and her head leaning on my shoulder.

'During that drive there was no need for words. Indeed, I found that the longer we knew each other, the closer we came to being one, and the less we needed to say; our feelings and our thoughts mingled and blended in a singular way; so it was from this rare blend of minds that I sometimes trembled for our happiness and future together. Such harmony in this imperfect world is not only rare, but nearly always only short-lived; its aftermath bleak, lonely and painful. However, when we got back home, I did ask Francesca – even though I felt she already knew – if she had felt anything unusual at the airport, aside from missing her parents who were leaving Africa and flying to Rome.

'She turned to me, and her eyes were an agony of tears; her lovely mouth drooped, and she fell into my arms: she told me of her thoughts, which were very similar to my own impressions; but what was most soul-tearing was her fear. She was really frightened – not so much for herself, for while slight of build, Francesca had a most intrepid spirit; no, she feared for me, for us, for our binding love and togetherness, for some turn in destiny's wheel that could fall between us, and which, unbidden, could inexorably tear us apart. Unblemished happiness and joy are rarely granted for long as we live through life's struggles on Earth. Quite apart from the impressions we had each gleaned at the airport, these thoughts had for some time been drifting in the back of my mind; now they were back in less elusive form. It is natural to try and avoid that which we most fear, and I hoped that perhaps we might evade its grip if we let life slip quietly by, to pass unnoticed by not noticing; but destiny was not so easily deceived, and by stealth crept upon us and shook our lives so suddenly that half the fruit from our tree fell to the ground, while the other half withered in despair. I did not tell Francesca of these

abstract and foolish ideas, for they were born of youth and desperation; instead I strove to calm her fears by deflecting them away from ourselves, imposing them elsewhere, and that we, being sensitive, had drawn in their stray fronds.

‘Having no telephone in our estate house, we heard nothing from either Giovanni or Helen, so assumed that all was well, and that they were involved with luggage that had been sent earlier by ship, and moving into their new home. In fact I was glad not to hear in the midst of their moving, as any adverse news could have upset Francesca, and this in turn could have stirred an interrelation with her keenly felt impressions at the airport. In fact there was nothing amiss, at least not then. Time passed, and we heard that the d’Aquinos had moved into their bungalow on the southern outskirts of Salerno. They had no unexpected problems; but we noted that, to date at any rate, Giovanni had taken no action with the garage he had purchased. Eventually, after about six months we learnt from one of Helen’s letters that he had sold it on at a small profit.

‘We were on Glenlee Estate for another six months or so, when on one of my irregular meetings with the owner, just as I was about to leave, he dropped a bombshell into my lap. The future being uncertain, he had accepted an offer of purchase from one of the three big tea and coffee companies; they had been very reasonable, and had agreed to delay the actual take over until our current coffee crop had been picked, processed on the estate and taken into the Kenya Coffee Board; after which the estate would be passed to the purchasing company on a walk-in, walk-out basis. This was not unanticipated; taking advantage of the political uncertainty in the country, companies had long taken note of several privately owned coffee estates in the best areas, and by selective buying these companies were extending their influence and land holdings at prices well below their normal values. Coffee prices were at a peak, and had been high for many years; so to sell their estates below market value was no burden to the coffee barons, many of whom were already enormously wealthy. It was the managers, and assistants if any, who were the losers, as they rarely had the capital to buy the land themselves, much less to carry the initial equipment, workers and living expenses.

‘Oh yes, independence! Proven to be a ruthlessly contrived weapon of destruction, affecting more than 90% in any African country. Compared to many, Kenya was probably the most fortunate; her downhill slide has been slow. Other states have not been so fortunate. Anyway, André, this is not a political diatribe: world leaders manipulate their own affairs, and those of others, as they wish; but how sad it is that there are so very few wise and altruistic statesmen.’

‘Why, Hugh, I had no idea you felt so strongly about politics!’ interjected André, with a slightly humorous thrust underlying his words.

‘Politics! Isn’t it just a word that with its “ists” and “isms” that in reality distorts by embracing expediency? But I mustn’t allow myself to be sidetracked since –’ Hugh’s eyes twinkled for a moment – ‘my own mind seeks a coward’s path in expedience to evade what I need to tell you,’ said Hugh with a touch of bitterness in his voice.

‘Francesca knew it was bad news even as I was opening our front door; but in matters such as this she was a very bulwark of support. Even after the estate had been officially sold, we would have to stay somewhere nearby until my coffee bonus came through; meanwhile I would approach the coffee company that was buying Glenlee Estate, and see if they would not consider using me as their manager after the change in ownership. After all, I reasoned, nobody knew the estate better, and I already had a good name for producing top-quality coffee.

‘However, they declined, while full of praise for my work and its results. I thanked them; left their offices in Nairobi, and thought, Of course I would try the other companies, and wherever I could; but I could see the twofold snag: we had not been in Kenya long enough to be regarded as established – at least by the big English and French companies; I had only a nine-month temporary post with one of the lesser groups, and then Glenlee; but Brooke Bond, James Warren and Socfinaf had extensive connections, and drew their managers from either their own pools of well-known and established Kenyans, or from those known to be of good class with financial expectations. That sounds very cynical, but it was the underlying reality; I had one of

their unspoken requirements, but not the other, and finance is always the more powerful when the chips are down. Then, too, there was a glut of coffee managers at the time; even some of the smaller estate owners who had sold up, but who wished to remain in the country, were snapped up; for at least they amply fulfilled the financial requirement.

‘I tried Socfinaf, but with Kenya being a British Colony, they were doubly cautious of the future, and had little motive for expanding. But they were clever, for occasionally when the chance lay to hand, they were ready to buy a good estate, and then before they had even taken it over, sell it on to one of the big British companies at a profit. Anyway, I found them to be the most genuinely cooperative, for they had no such hang-ups on synthetic requirements, but they also had no vacancies.

‘We stayed with a cousin of mine near Kitale; he had a very productive farm near the foot of Mount Elgon – a thousand acres of cash crops grown almost from boundary to boundary! Unlike coffee land, his farm was not considered to be under any direct threat, so while he was ready to move at some time, he felt no urgency. They were rich and dutifully hospitable, there being no love lost between cash-crop farmers and tea or coffee estate owners or managers. Our main problem was that of distance: Kitale was the last Highlands outpost before the land fell away to the hot and arid Northern Frontier District, and a good 250 miles to Nairobi, where I was to collect my coffee production bonus cheque, and also to keep in touch with estate management possibilities.

‘Every week for a month I left Francesca with my cousins and drove down to Nairobi, staying a night or two, which allowed me to check on any coffee estate vacancies, and of course the vital bonus I was due. At the same time Francesca and I wracked our brains as to our next step; due to our modest financial situation, and the glut of coffee estate managers, we felt it would be unwise to wait in the apparently forlorn hope that something just may drop into our laps.

‘It was then that I had a letter from my mother in England, saying that my father was very unwell and his life uncertain. The invitation was there, so although I felt I was regarded askance as

the black sheep – the rebel in the family – I saw this as a guiding sign: I, the eldest son, who had no regard for class and a military career, or for pomp and circumstance in any form! I hoped I could heal the unspoken rift in time. We agreed that if nothing had come up by the time my coffee bonus cheque arrived, then we would go to England and stay with my parents, accepting my home as a base to look for a suitable post overseas, preferably in Africa.

‘To cut a long story short, we did just that; but we decided to make this something of a holiday break, a second honeymoon, by driving to Cape Town (about four thousand miles), then by Union Castle to Southampton – a sea trip of about seventeen days with a stop in Las Palmas. We made provisional bookings on *the Cape Town Castle* which was due to dock in Cape Town in about four weeks. This time everything ran like clockwork: my coffee cheque came in, rather more than I had expected due to the generosity of the late owner of Glenlee. We were positively excited after so much frustration, and of having to put on my rich cousin in Kitale. They had been good hosts, but I was keenly aware that I had been regarded as a poor out-of-work relative, for he was a great snob. At any rate, we left on good terms, with fine memories of the slopes of Mount Elgon, and with others of their civilised lifestyle; so it was with relief when we drove to Nairobi.

‘Our first call was on a travel agent, where we were relieved at the reasonable cost of a twin-berth cabin. I then asked what it would cost to take our car on board as well, and again I was pleasantly surprised – although not below decks. I promptly confirmed our booking, along with the car, on *the Cape Town Castle*, which, barring breakdowns en route, we should have no trouble in meeting in good time. Travel by sea was very reasonable in those days; but all that has changed, as I’m sure you know.

‘One of the advantages of going by car was that we could carry all our possessions, much of which could remain in the car on the ship. The journey by road could only be taken by stages, very much like the old stagecoaches of the American West, from one small, or larger, town to the next; the only difference being that they were horse-drawn, while we were horsepower driven. We

had the occasional luxury of driving on tarmac: in Kenya to their border at Namanga, from Arusha for about ten miles, then murram and corrugations to Mbeya, bordering Zambia, as it is now known; after which it became a mixture of murram with some strip tarmac nearly all the way to Lusaka.

‘The distance on this leg was considerable and, with only one nearly dry petrol pump en route, we only just made it to a hotel in Lusaka before the car ran dry of fuel. A few days later we stopped for three nights in Salisbury for a break and to get the car serviced. Then more murram, dust and strip tarmac; it was only when we got into South Africa that we could enjoy driving on tarmac.

‘If I remember correctly, the whole trip including our nightly stops took us about two weeks; we weren’t straining, and we broke no records, but we were always hindered or being stretched by the “stage-coach-type” stops. We arrived in Cape Town five or six days before the *Cape Town Castle* was due in from Durban. The long drive had been both interesting and very tiring: long hours on Africa’s murram roads with their heat and dust, loose sand and corrugations, called for continuous concentration, which can be exhausting for both drivers and passengers; fortunately Francesca was just nineteen when we married, while I was only four years older than her, so we weren’t unduly strained by our long safari. I should just mention that we had been married for several years at the time of our Nairobi to Cape safari.

‘Our sea voyage was an idyllic time in our lives. There was not a moment we did not live life in its fullness. There was variety on board, both in people and occupations; but our greatest joy lay in the sea, and the great ship that carried us through the limitless ocean. About us was life, a symphony of sight and sound, serene and beautiful when the wind sang quietly of its mystery in varying tones and tunes, the sea’s mood one of security and peace. But that peace could change swiftly, should the wind unleash its calm and howl in fury; yet deep beneath the surface slow currents still flowed quietly, secure and undisturbed by the rage above. Peace and power: the two lying latent in the vastness of the ocean and the mood of the wind. For most of the voyage the weather was kind, and we watched as the sea foamed along the ship’s side, while from the stern twin screws thrust opposing spirals of power

from the ship's great turbines, twisting their drives against the ocean's vastness.

'In the evenings we would often dance before going on deck, where we watched the stars and the thin streamers of light that ran wavy lines along the surface. Because Francesca was so lovely and attractive, it was natural that she would be asked to dance by many of the men on board; but this was a tingling pain I pleasantly endured, for I knew she would always come back to me; that the first dance would be mine, and our last dance too – the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega. Mind you, in those days I was not bad looking myself, so to tease her I had my own occasional share among the ladies on the dance floor.

'Time sped by, and we would both have been perfectly happy had the voyage gone on, and on. However, we docked one morning in Southampton, where my parents were waiting to greet us. They could not help but be enchanted by Francesca – even my father who was inclined to be pedantic and formal; while within an hour my mother had forgotten her scepticism about me marrying a girl who was half Italian. When our car had been offloaded we followed them to the house which my father had designed, and which they had built some years before on a corner of the Earl of B's extensive estate.

'I'll skim over the time we stayed with my parents, which was not without its difficulties. I tried without success under the circumstances to heal the unspoken rift; my younger brothers were more favoured than I, and pulled against me, and my father was too set in his ways, and too near his end, for me to be able to make much impact on his thinking. In the end his heart gave out, and he died on the 8th of February, 1964, about two months after Francesca and I arrived.

'A further two months passed before I was offered a curious post by a company in London. They were looking for a surveyor with mapping and drawing skills for a country in West Africa. It was all very discreet, and the chosen employee would have to work alongside a geologist, one with a special interest in diamonds and other gemstones. Only after I had been offered, and was ready to sign a one-year contract in the first instance, did they let on that this enterprise was at the personal and confidential request

of President Tubman of Liberia: obviously the old boy was hoping to increase his personal and already substantial nest-egg! Life at the top was always precarious. West Africa, the White Man's Graveyard, was hardly less indiscriminating to its own! We discussed this offer before committing myself to signing their contract, stressing the known health risks along the West Coast, and other largely unknown factors, for this was new territory to me. The West Coast, merging into Cameroon and much of the Congo, differs vastly to all of Eastern Africa, although on a continental scale the change is fairly gradual.

'I was in a very difficult position: our funds were low, and no other jobs had been offered during the previous three and a half months. Both of us were restless in England's restrictive atmosphere, made no easier by my hampered status; all so very different to the type of life we had been forced to leave. Francesca knew I could not afford to refuse this lucrative offer, but when I timidly suggested that she should go to her parents while I did my year in Liberia, the idea appalled her, and I was met with an adamant rejection at the very thought of her going to some safe place while I went on alone – and for a whole year! But it was her look of loss and sorrow that pierced me through, which wrung my heart and the tears from my eyes. A great peace of mind flooded my being. Let the world be lost; I was indeed blessed in what truly mattered... Cause and consequence: if only I had seen into the future.

'With my half-hearted attempt to keep Francesca safe now put firmly behind us, but with the warnings given us by an old West Coast hand whom we met in Portsmouth, particularly in respect of Liberia and Nigeria, I became cautious and even afraid in my fears for Francesca's health and welfare. I checked the salary and the three-month bonus at the end of my contract, then more importantly the medical facilities and the housing. We had been promised a suitable air-conditioned house in Sinkor, a suburb to the east of Monrovia. There were other factors, but as each was confirmed I became more confident, even optimistic.

'We left my mother alone in her large house, and I remember my heart reaching out to her as she stood on the doorstep, looking small and lonely: in that moment I understood her more fully

than had been possible when my father was alive; I felt the love that flamed in her, bound and suppressed by her shyness and the cramping dictates of her Victorian-type background. I was to see her once again before she died some sixteen years later, but insurmountable barriers had grown up during the long years that had passed, barriers that could only be lightly dented, but not overcome. Years later, after she had died, she came to me here in Patagonia, and then there were no barriers.

‘We stayed a night at the Ariel Hotel, close to Heathrow, and flew the next morning by the Dutch airline that covered the West African route from Lagos, then followed the coastline, landing at Accra and Abidjan, before touching down at the Firestone Airport some miles out of Monrovia. In the turboprop aircraft of those days, it had been a long and tiring flight, with each landing bathing us in steamy heat.

‘I should tell you that in one respect, Liberia differed starkly to any of the three previous touchdowns on the coast: while I was descending the steps from the plane, I was smitten with horror, crushed in on myself as wave after wave of dark visions descended on me, multi-reflections from evil deeds and thoughts from both the present and the past, fleeting visions of cruel sights and scenes flooded my mind and spirit; it was as if this sickness was waiting for me to emerge from the plane. What had we got ourselves into? I thought. The sudden shock was shattering, and dragged me down for three days until I gathered the strength to shoulder this awful burden. To my surprise and relief, Francesca was unaffected; one of those rare times when our minds were not in tune. I mentioned this to her, but made light of it, for I felt in this it was better that I alone was forewarned. I cannot think that my experience was unique, although I have never heard of anyone else who had been assailed in this fashion.

‘It is often recorded that West Africa either makes or breaks a man. There is truth in this, as I saw later in the human wrecks adorning the streets of Monrovia; but the same is true in many parts of the world. At the least the West Coast leaves a permanent mark in one’s mind; some rise up within themselves; many live on bearing half-healed scars; but a few drift and sink, often into a dulled drink-sodden limbo, barely aware in their anaesthetising

haze, losing all remnants of self-respect. But, André, most of these are poor souls, with torn memories and without hope; broken on life's wheel with no place to hide, they often return to such lands, where they drag out their lost and impoverished existences, unrecognised in life and forgotten in death: beggars in a land of beggars... But I have already written on my life and experiences on the West Coast, and this is not the time to dabble on the fringes.'

Hugh paused, breaking abruptly from the sombre trend of his thoughts, and looked straight at André. 'You're the soul of tact, my friend; for I am sure you have wondered why we had no children after being married for as long as we had?'

'It had crossed my mind,' André replied, 'but there's no need to tell me about anything so personal.'

'Not at all,' said Hugh. 'Francesca and I were very close, and if I never mentioned this apparent anomaly, it would stick in your mind after I had gone, and could prove to be a hurdle as to the truth of what I'm telling you. It's human nature, André, and no fault of yours. Briefly, when we were first married and living on a coffee estate on Mount Oldeani, we had hoped for either the birth of a son or a daughter; then later, after Francesca had lost her second embryo child, she burst into tears, feeling that she had let me down. This was nonsense of course, but after she had calmed down she told me that her difficulty in bearing children had been inherited from her grandmother through her mother, Helen; and although she had hoped and prayed otherwise, she was obviously afflicted with the same problem. Both her grandmother and her mother had successfully given birth to one child only, but neither at the first attempt; both had only eventually succeeded after a peaceful and stable nine months, after which there were no more.'

'As you have heard from me, while our lives together were filled with joy, they had not been either peaceful or stable for long enough periods. Francesca was young, barely twenty-seven years of age when we went to Liberia – so perhaps after this year on the West Coast... If only, I thought, it could give her the stability and climate she needed... But events overtook us, as you will see.'

'My geological companion had arrived in Liberia about two weeks before. He was Swedish, Lars Andersen, a rough diamond,

an old West Coast hand of nearly fifty years of age. We got on very easily, and he was only too happy to show me the ropes and, when possible, how to avoid the many pitfalls in Liberia. Lars had prospected in Liberia before, so had a good idea where to launch our efforts. We had only to ask in a certain quarter to be able to draw on local workers; if we were exploring, and I surveying and mapping, we only needed five or six Liberians; but this rose sharply when we found any leads. We had two Land Rovers, suitably equipped with all we would need, which in itself was a remarkable feat in a country where organisation trailed dismally behind occasional spurts of intent. Of course the climate with its tropical heat, and a steamy 98 to 100% year-round humidity, sucked away one's resistance, and I could well see why contracts were generally limited to a year, although some were two years, or even more in the case of many missionaries.

'The country's death rate was high. Among the many tropical diseases, malaria was unavoidable, sometimes followed by hepatitis after repeated weakening doses; with yellow fever these and several others were blood-bearing gifts from the anopheles mosquito. There is so much I could tell you, André, about this inhospitable country which, like it or not, sticks in one's gullet for the rest of one's life. For instance, just one thing; it was not long before I discovered that there was a booming slave trade in young Africans, and Whites when available: those unlucky to be captured by local slave traders, were taken on a well-worn route north into Mali; then from somewhere near the border, possibly Bamako, Arab slavers inspected the goods, paid for them, then took them across the Sahara by truck to Arabia.

'The Captain of the shallow-draught ship that ran a regular passenger and cargo service from Lagos to Liverpool, called in at every port on the West Coast; but in the port of Monrovia he always warned his passengers, especially young girls, against going ashore, unless with a strong male escort. He was not allowed to mention the dangers of slaving, for slaving was an undercover business, on which officially the President was unaware, let alone people such as Lars and myself!

'Still, there were some who were foolish and ignored the Captain's strong advice: while I was there two English girls, aged

around eighteen to nineteen years, took it into their heads to leave the ship and explore Monrovia: they vanished without trace, and were never seen again! That was the last anyone ever heard of them – the ship left for Liverpool later that day.

‘On the work side, Lars and I were quite successful, which was just as well, or the ground could have been cut from under our feet – Liberian-style. Lars had never expected to find much in gem-quality diamonds, and had said so before accepting the post. In our report for the year, this was confirmed when we found, surveyed and mapped several areas where there were pockets of diamonds, recovering samples from each site; but they were almost consistently fairly small and of industrial quality, with only about 5% which could be classified as gem quality stones. They were, nevertheless, of considerable value, whether on the open market in Europe, or on the black market.

‘Having dealt briefly with my work aspect with Lars Andersen, which was so vital to our security and general welfare in Liberia, I must return to our lives in this almost satanic part of the world. Given to freed American Negro slaves in the 1840s, and under those who had chosen to sail here from the New World, this land became a harshly dictatorial state, in which all the considerable mineral and business wealth was held by the Americo-Liberians, as they became known. The harshness was not immediately apparent under the general mantle of sloth, but the poverty and near starvation that pervaded the country were very obvious, along with theft, coercion and criminal hire on a countrywide scale. We noticed the almost complete absence of indigenous Liberian children, and it was not long before we learnt by personal experience through our house servant’s wife, that many infants were taken by their fathers to the witch doctors, where they were ritually sacrificed to appease their gods, and for a release from their tyrannical rulers: the freed slaves from America – the Americo-Liberians!

‘Neither of us could like Liberia, indeed, I don’t recall any who did; but we got to know the families of men who were on contract, and we kept in close touch with the staff from the German and Swedish Embassies; partially for security, and as bolt holes if any trouble arose. In this very foreign land people sought

each other's company for similar reasons. Francesca's enterprising spirit saw the lack of any educational facilities, so used our house to start an any-age morning school; this proved to be hugely popular, with mixed nationalities and a wide spread in ages – a mini United Nations. It also afforded a focal point for the parents who ran their children to and from our home, and became a daily meeting place for the latest local scandal when collecting their young charges. Aside from Francesca's little school, we managed a reasonable, but sporadic, social life, even if this was to learn about their latest misfortunes, and sometimes even tragedies.

'From the school and through Lars we met some very original people, some almost unique. Along with the unnatural tensions in the country, Liberia's diverse ethos drew out characteristics that would never normally emerge; together these had the effect of loosening people's inhibitions, so bringing about a variety of reactions from person to person. Cosseted in deceptively benign surroundings, our lives were never dull; they veered between extremes, from the ludicrous to the truly tragic; yet even the tragic were often wrapped in a macabre humour of its own. Such was the fate of the poor lady who unknowingly lit her leaking gas stove, to be blown through the strong steel mesh covering her kitchen window. The mesh did not give way, but much of her body was stripped and sieved! Circled by the country's dark and insidious influences, it was vital to hold on to our mental equilibrium, for a slack watch could endanger our mental stability.

'However, aside from the many original reactions and results, Liberia had its own peculiarity, in that it was not only a focal point for world news, but also as a magnet for some of the most unusual, brilliant and eccentric people I have ever met in any one place, most of whom were "birds of passage". One who called on us was a Merchant Navy Captain – a brilliant seascape artist. I remember how tremendously impressed we were when he unrolled five or six of his paintings for us to see; sadly, all had been spoken for. He told us quite casually that in good weather and during slack times on voyages he would put up his easel on the bridge, and just paint. But there were many more widely diverse characters; the only ground they shared were their

extensive roots, for of one sort or another, they all had long and short-range links around the world.

‘Under the general nerve strain in Liberia, horror, shock, pathos and comedy became intermingled in many of the events, great or small, which in turn frequently set off scenes of near hysterical laughter. One such was Madame Korlu’s publicised decapitation over a bath, with graphic illustrative pictures in the local newspaper. This led on to a spectral ceremonial dance, performed at night on the wide sands of one of Monrovia’s beaches, being a failed attempt to depose the President through witchcraft.

‘Another was the belly-dancing Baroness, an Ouled Nail of North African origin. A certain Irish Lord was so entranced by her voluptuous dancing to the bongo drums that, while in his cups, he married her. The hasty marriage was quite legal, so when sober in the cold morning air of the desert, he slid quietly away for the green fields of home, hoping the whole horrible incident would be forgotten. However, the dusky Baroness did not forget; but being a lady of an acquisitive nature, and short of money, before she set out to recapture her beloved spouse, she came to Liberia where she rejoined a rich lover, an Americo-Liberian, Romeo H, with whom she publicly declared herself to be passionately in love. This did not work out, so in a dramatic scene she drew a knife across her belly – making sure the cut was only shallow – saying to all that she would never dance again. Her lover, greatly embarrassed, made arrangements for her to be hustled onto a plane and flown along the coast. In due course, this enterprising lady made her way to Britain where she strove to take up her position as the Baroness to her milord, but only to find that she was in competition with another woman of the night, who also laid claim to be his wife! Years later she and the other were still locked in legal battle!

‘Then there was the terrible case of Yarkopolo: he had been a worker on the Firestone Rubber Plantations near the airport. The steamy heat and other unknown pressures proved to be too much for him. One day he simply went mad, stark staring mad; and with the strength of a madman his heavy, razor-sharp rubber-tree knife became a vicious weapon in his hands; with blurred eyes he

slashed at those around him. Within a minute he was borne to the ground and overcome, but not before the carnage he wrought had been considerable – eight men dead or wounded!

You might well ask, what became of Yarkopolo! In effect, justice in Liberia was non-existent, wearing only a thin skin of convenience; so a poor common workman such as he had no rights at all. The Police had a field day; they drove Yarkopolo through the main streets of Monrovia in the back of an open truck, sadistically pummelling and battering this poor madman, revelling in their power. He was taken to the football grounds, and there he was tortured – slowly, so that he might savour his agony. After he had died, his body was lashed to a pole, bleeding and torn; then, escorted by the militia and the Police, it was carried across the main road into the police grounds, but not without a struggle, as en route it fell prey to the crazed mob, stabbing and tearing at the already mutilated corpse, and leering in at the closed windows of cars that had been forced to stop, my own included. At last it was done, with myself feeling sick and deeply shocked, for in the struggle the body had slid across the front of my vehicle, leaving a dark bloody smear.

‘Thank God, Francesca was not with me. The finale to these terrible deeds was that Yarkopolo’s body, still lashed to the pole, was stuck into the ground facing the road for all to see, but behind the barbed wire fence surrounding the police grounds. There it was left for seven days in that humid heat... André, I’m sorry; perhaps I should never have told you about Yarkopolo; but it left such a vivid memory, and when I first mentioned his name and started on his story, I knew you would insist on hearing it all. You see, I saw much of what transpired; I could not have avoided it; nor would I if I could, for if ever a tortured man needed even unseen sympathy to oppose the fanatics surrounding him, then I could neither leave nor forget. I’m also aware that I’ve given you a very negative view of the West Coast, particularly Liberia, but with few substantiating facts; but here in the tale of Yarkopolo is one lurid snippet. They vary, and this is but one of many.

‘Liberia is a languidly turbulent and potentially explosive country; a land of many contradictions, with underlying forces pulling in differing directions. Here you have a partial but

succinct description from when I was there. The suppression of the indigenous population had been going on for so long, that when it did explode it was bound to be mindless and extremely violent – events now are showing this to be the case. Living in Liberia was like walking on egg-shells. Every morning I went out there was always the very real risk of being unable to return home: for little or no reason one could end the day in prison, or be robbed, or meet with a variety of accidents; but it was at least an unforgettable experience and rarely, if ever, boring.

‘However here, very briefly, is a lighter story, one that has been officially recorded – and not many are, although Yarkopolo was. In the early twentieth century, around 1910, they had a plague of rats, in and around Monrovia at least. Their practical reaction, or that of the ever watchful America, was to combat this infestation by the very practical means of introducing cats, and simply letting them loose around the town and suburbs. In this they were fortunate that Holland had at the time a dearth of stray cats, and was therefore very cooperative. I don’t know how many of their strays they caught, but the Dutch collected up at least fifty, probably many more, which were duly shipped to Monrovia and let loose. Well, in a cycle of kill or be killed, these cats soon became quite wild and learned to live off the land: they scavenged, hunted and killed rats, and grew large and powerful; those that survived the ever-hungry human population became as ferocious as any of the wild cats in the world. The plague of rats was curbed, then reversed, until rats ceased to be a national pest.

‘By the 1960s generations of these cats had developed physically in power and speed, with the unusual characteristic that their ears were set laterally and low on their heads; they were broad and immensely strong for their size, and when they ran they appeared to glide swiftly over the ground. They were like miniature leopards in grace and cunning, stealth and ferocity. From necessity I’ve had some hands-on dealing with one of these cats, but in its fury and fear not until it had leaped up and shredded much of the wire netting in the kitchen! My purpose was to move it to another part of Monrovia.

‘We were fortunate regarding our health during our year in Liberia: Francesca caught malaria only once, for which I was very

thankful, since the West Coast is reputed to be home to the most virulent types of anopheles mosquito. Being more exposed, I was less fortunate, and was smitten by its debilitating fever several times, the last followed by hepatitis within six weeks of the expiration of Lars Andersen's contract, although he stayed a further two weeks to match my contract. He appeared to have built up a degree of immunity when it came to malaria, for although Lars had it twice while we were working together, it never seemed to affect him too badly.'

As tiredness dragged at Hugh, André had been listening anxiously to his voice as it began to falter and slur slightly. He was approaching the climax of his story, and sheering away from it, although at the same time he needed to tell André. It was hard to gauge Hugh's age, but he was at least well into his sixties, and his stamina had been eroded by the recent strains he had been under.

André suggested, 'You've had a difficult life, Hugh. Would you mind if we took a break at this point? I've got a few things I should do before this evening, and I'm sure you won't object to a little rest before our supper. Perhaps you'd like to continue later this evening, or even tomorrow morning if you wish?'

'This evening, if you have the time,' replied Hugh. 'I am a little tired; my meeting with Pietro, and what followed, have been quite a shock. Anyway, I shouldn't stay any longer; my chela is waiting, and I should leave tomorrow morning.'

André smiled, and nodded in agreement. No further words were spoken. Between them they gathered up the cushions and the tray of refreshments, and made their way back to the house.

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It was well into the afternoon when the two friends got back to the house. André washed and cleared up the debris from their lunch, while Hugh paced about with a drying-up cloth, looking refreshed but slightly drawn and feeling out of place.

At length André broke into his thoughts as Hugh paced up and down the kitchen. 'You can't really help me here, Hugh,' he said wryly, 'in any case you're carving a groove in my carpet! I think your donkey will need some attention by now, after which you could make yourself comfortable in the lounge. By the time you're back I'll have tea ready, along with some of my home-made biscuits.'

'I'm truly sorry. For two nights and a whole day I've been taking up your time and imposing on your hospitality. Am I a real nuisance to you?' Hugh asked, a trifle anxiously.

'You should know better than that,' replied André. 'I regard you as a friend, a rather special one; but even had you not been one I would have willingly given whatever I can. I count it a privilege and a pleasure to have the opportunity to listen to your story. But enough! Your donkey will need food and water, and you need some rest and relaxation.' He paused. 'I do know how painful it has been going over some of your past; but it's been locked away for too long, so I can understand how vital it is for you to tell someone... to share the burdens and the joys, and not to let them become distorted through time, especially in view of your most recent experiences. Perhaps,' he added, 'you're hoping that the very act of recounting your past might throw a clearer light into some of the more obscure corners that may be troubling you.'

'What can I say?' said Hugh, taken aback. 'Of course, you're right. But not just *someone*!' he added. 'That you certainly are not...'

Not wishing to embarrass him further, André interrupted. 'Hugh,' he said firmly, 'your donkey needs your care, and tea will be ready when you get back. Do remember, my home is yours as long as you wish. You are always very welcome – always!'

After Hugh returned, he sank gratefully into an armchair in the lounge, drank some of the tea that André had laid out for him, ate half a biscuit, and fell asleep. The tired lines on his face eased away as he was gathered into the gentle arms of sleep, into a land of his far past, of lovely memories. André looked down at his friend, deeply concerned at Hugh's obvious suffering and losses over the years.

André busied himself about the house and outbuildings, for he wanted to be around when Hugh was awake. In fact he woke about two hours later, well rested and apparently more like 'the Butterfly Man' he had known for years, his mind and memory sharp and alert. The transformation was so complete that for a moment it took André by surprise; but shortly after, while they were both taking a walk around the garden, André again observed Hugh's deep underlying weariness; even so the change had been remarkable, although he had occasionally seen men of his age who had lived physically active lives, able to take a short nap and emerge temporarily rejuvenated.

During supper, Hugh declared that he was quite recovered, and would like to conclude his story that evening. 'You remember,' he said, smiling, 'I must get to my chela where I left him in the foothills of the Lago Argentino.'

After they had cleared the table, André brought in a coffee tray, glasses and a bottle of his Brazilian wine; after which he swung two of the armchairs so that they were almost facing each other. Hugh then picked up his story where he had left off.

'We left Liberia, but not without some problems. Let me explain: during the last two months or so, while Lars Andersen and I were working together, insurrection started with some sporadic riots of considerable violence around Monrovia; these were occasionally followed at night by hellish witchcraft ceremonies and some vile practices on the wider beaches.

'Except when we went home, these did not affect either of us, since we worked inland away from any centres of population.

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However, I was very concerned for Francesca's safety, and with the support of some of our friends, I absolutely insisted that she catch the West Coast ship for Liverpool, and then go to my mother's, from which haven she could book an open flight to Las Palmas. Later, on hearing from me with the date of my own arrival, we would synchronise our times and, if possible, arrive in Gran Canaria on the same day; after which we'd go together to Rome, and on to her parents, where we could "reshuffle our feathers" and decide what to do next. I made a provisional booking to Las Palmas from Liberia, and two others to Rome and Naples from Las Palmas.

'This was the first time we had been apart since our wedding day, and Francesca was not at all happy about it; fearing for my own safety, she begged me to leave with her. I would loved to have done so, but while we were better off financially than we had been, I couldn't afford to break my contract and leave with her; to have done so would have meant foregoing my bonus and three months' leave salary, and could very possibly land Lars in trouble.

'Francesca was badly shaken one morning when a gang of thugs surrounded our house in Sinkor, leering in the windows and threatening to break down the front door. At the time she had been more terrified for the children in her care, who drew close to her as to a mother hen. No matter how primitive, there were few in the gang who did not love children, and I like to believe that the sight of nine or ten frightened young faces softened the madness in their hearts. At any rate, those looking in by the windows became quiet, gazing at the scene as though it was a lost and forgotten part of themselves; then, from some unspoken signal, they just melted away, and were heard no more in the vicinity.

'When I got home Francesca clung to me tightly, her body shaking with great sobs. She had been brave so long for the children; but now they were gone, her tension exploded to the surface and she was temporarily distraught. After hearing it all from her, I knew that she must not only be got out of the country, but until the ship docked I must take her to one of the embassy homes during the day, German or Swedish. At the same time, and perhaps strangely, I felt a great sympathy for this lost people; a

people who could hack you to bits with scarcely a second thought, but who could be so deeply touched and calmed by a group of young children; I wished I could reach through to them, but their mob thinking was too entrenched, and they were held in thrall by their witch doctors.

‘Fortunately, on its round trip between Liverpool and Lagos, the West Coast ship was due to dock in Monrovia in the next two or three days on its northerly run. Being an old ship, and the working sailors being a mix of Ibo and Nigerian peoples, natural enemies, delays could occur. Francesca’s school was closed immediately, and she arranged to spend her days while waiting with some Swedish friends of ours. The boat docked, and with a great sense of pending loneliness coursing through me, we went on board and I saw her established in her cabin. Shortly after, I watched as the ship pulled away from the faint pervading stench of mangrove swamps and Liberia. At least Francesca would be safe, which would make my remaining time easier to bear.

‘Now, Lars Andersen was a bachelor, and as a *quid pro quo* Francesca had made us both promise to make our home together during our last weeks: we did this, and Lars moved in with me. ‘There’s little more I need to tell you about our time in Liberia. Lars and I stuck together and had few problems until, on the evening of the day on which we had finally been paid our bonuses and leave allowances, we heard stealthy noises outside. “Assassins!” hissed Lars. We turned down the lights and prepared for a head count and battle. It was Lars’ experience that outside of embassy staffs and established companies, those who had been privately employed ran the slight risk at the end of their contracts of being robbed or assassinated after their salaries had been paid, and before they had left the country. Indirectly, we had been working on the President’s behalf, and Lars reasoned that those involved would not want to risk the leaking of any rumours of diamond exploration and mining, but particularly illicit dealings to spread beyond Liberia’s borders. We peered through windows, but could only pick out three thugs in the darkness, crouching by the front door, armed with clubs and machetes. Being only three in number, they were probably unaware that Lars had moved in with me, and that there were two of us to contend with, not one.

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‘We conferred together in low tones, and agreed to split up. Moving as silently as cats, we crept round the house and caught them by surprise from both sides. After a short scrimmage, it was all over, with all of them knocked silly, either with their own clubs or with handy rocks that we carried. We tied their wrists and ankles securely, gagged them, then pushed my car out of the garage, leaving ample space for our captives.

‘After this we dragged them into the empty garage, and tied them together back to back. Lars then took the last of our rope, pushed their heads together and bound a single cord around their necks; they could breathe without difficulty, but any attempts to struggle would only have choked off their breathing. These were essential precautions, as we could not risk them being heard before we had made our getaway. We left them in the closed garage, where they were bound to be found sometime the next day by our employer’s agents coming to check on our ‘welfare’, and the house. I could never be certain if the President himself was behind this attempt on our lives, or one of his enemies. There was sufficient motive from either angle.

‘We agreed that our flight plans would have to be changed, and swiftly: the assassins would have been expected to report back on the success of their mission; had they not done so, then other stronger groups would be sent out, perhaps even that same night. I was due to fly out mid-morning the next day, with one change at Madrid, while Lars was booked to fly the day after to Amsterdam, and from there to Oslo. I knew there was a Varig plane from Brazil, stopping at Monrovia at about 0130 hours that same night en route to Madrid. Liberia was a land of bribes and backhanders, so as we both had US dollars with us, we quickly collected our luggage, put it into the back of Lars’ Land Rover and sped out to Robertsville Airport. Lars was better acquainted with this type of negotiation, so I let him approach the sole air ticket officer on duty at that time, and when he had been successful, I followed suit: it worked out more easily than I had expected.

‘We flattered this simple ticket officer with much laughter and back-slapping, with the passing of dollars and the amending of our tickets; after which, it not being yet 11 p.m., our ticket officer plainly wanted to get some sleep before any other passengers

turned up for this late-night flight. We were thankful for that, hoping to be forgotten, so we sought a dark corner in the waiting lounge. All went well. The plane arrived, and we boarded with a scattering of other passengers; but it was not until we were airborne that we both breathed great sighs of relief.

‘Before I leave the Liberian scene and move on, I should tell you something, André. You remember me telling you about the decapitation of Madame Korlu, and of what followed?’

‘Indeed, I do,’ responded André. ‘Is there more to it?’

‘A great deal more! I’ve barely done more than touch on the incident. There’s an indirect link that you should know about. When you told me about Pietro, the sunken *Viking*, the six castaways, and so on, you also told me how you saw the place where Henry Curtis had been buried in the shingle, close to the foot of the cliff. I remember that when his beloved wife died, that he took to random travelling, anything to keep his body and mind occupied while he struggled to come to terms with the impossible. Well, before he took a berth on *The Viking*, he landed at Monrovia. He had no occupation in Liberia, and I can’t imagine why he should stop off there, of all places. Anyway, he did, and in his inland wanderings, both Lars and I met him. We liked him immensely, and after learning that he was staying at the Ducor Palace Hotel, evading his memories, Francesco and I asked him round one evening. He was a sad man – a man in waiting, we felt; but nothing could hide his strength of character, nor his personality when he chose to use it. He knew about our single West Coast round-trip ship, and was a bit cross with himself for being stranded here, for he had missed one sailing to Liverpool, and would have to wait six weeks for the next northerly sailing.

‘At any rate, Henry was by nature both curious and observant, and as his stay coincided with the Madame Korlu affair, he came to know about it from the local newspaper, and discreetly learned about a pending ceremony on the beach. On that particular night he dressed in dark slacks and shirt, and quietly made his own way to the beach where he had heard the “dance” was to take place. He waited for some long time, and was about to leave, thinking that he had been misled, when he saw movement and people further along the beach: a gathering of at least a hundred, grouped in a

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large, almost silent circle. What little sounds they made were drowned by the closer *crump* of the collapsing waves, followed by their hissing skid as they swept up the wet sand of the beach.

‘Well, Henry saw it all, but he dare not move without a very real risk of being seen; and the more he saw, the less he liked what he saw, for there was a growing stink of evil about the whole business, far stronger than his experience in East Africa had ever shown. I won’t go into all the details, about which Henry later wrote in an anthropomorphic tale which he titled “The Forgotten Land”. Eventually they dispersed in the early hours, and Henry, as he thought, had slipped away unseen. It was nearly dawn when he got back to his hotel, during which time he had been spotted by several people, some of whom had been near him in Madame Korlu’s dance of death on the beach. It is an eerie feeling, one which takes time to become used to, for even in apparently remote areas, it’s almost impossible to move about in Africa without dark eyes seeing and watching all you do. In Monrovia, which is comparatively heavily populated, it’s quite impossible to pass unnoticed at any time, day or night. Henry had been in Africa for most of his life, but I think in his loss and distress he had forgotten, or just grown careless.

‘For a while I heard nothing more, until in some concern Francesca and I drove up to the Ducor Palace Hotel to see if there was anything wrong. We were met with blank faces and no answers; so I got hold of the hotel manager, and was bleakly informed that Mr Curtis had checked out four days before, which was two days after the ceremony on the beach; and that was the end of the trail, for we could get no further information from any quarter.

‘Two months later we had a letter from Henry, along with a manuscript, that being his story which I’ve just referred to. He thanked us warmly for our hospitality and kindness, and said the enclosed story would explain his abrupt disappearance. It did: he had been seen and recognised as having been on the beach that fateful evening, and they were after his blood. I suspect he revelled in the excitement; at any rate he slipped out and fought his way to the small adjoining fishing port, where, bleeding profusely from a machete cut to his arm, he found an old

fisherman who agreed to take him to Freetown, for a price; from there, by various means of transport, he managed to get back to England.'

'You could not have been aware of it,' put in André, 'but Henry Curtis was also known by Paulos in Liberia. Your two accounts differ in some respects, although they were clearly about the same time. However, I don't think this is important, for due to his self-imposed tensions Paulos's imagination tended to leap into a world of escapism; he'd never lie, but in the course of time events became distorted in his mind, for he had no idea if Curtis had escaped or not until later when Paulos also received a copy of Curtis's account in "The Forgotten Land".'

'It's strange how people and affairs can link up in the most unlikely places and ways. As to Henry's story, I think that Paulos and I are the only two to receive copies; it was never published as far as I know,' Hugh replied. 'By the way, Andre, you may have noticed that there's a substantial time lapse between when Curtis and I were in Liberia and the present: in fact Francesca and I were in Liberia about thirty-six years ago, and since receiving his manuscript, "The Forgotten Land", we have not been in contact. I think Henry must have returned to his home and work in Tanzania, but took to travelling from time to time, striving to allay his unforgettable memories of Mary – hence his presence on *The Viking*, and his merciful release from his life on Earth.

'But to return to our affairs – Lars' and mine. We arrived in Madrid later that morning, complete with our earnings and very relieved to have got away from Liberia. We both found seats on planes later that day: Lars to Oslo, I to Las Palmas. I missed him; he had been a good friend. Anyway, I got hold of a phone and managed to get through to my mother and to Francesca. In brief, I arranged to wait for her in Las Palmas until she got the earliest plane there, and we met. All went smoothly – and what a meeting! Two halves coming together...

'But our year in Liberia had put a heavy strain on us both, which we never fully realised at the time; I felt sapped, and my equilibrium had been shaken up over the year, especially so during the last six weeks. Even so, I saw very clearly that all was not well with Francesca; there was a pale fragility about her,

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which at first I put down to excitement and airsickness. Our love for each other was undiminished; but I felt bemused, for our mutual gift of being able to feel and intimately read each other had been disrupted. I knew it would return, but meanwhile I had an ominous premonition that she was deliberately holding something back from me.

‘While we were at our hotel that night, waiting to catch our plane to Rome the next day. Francesca seemed no better; I asked her what was wrong, but she tried to pass it off as “nothing to worry about” – which by then I knew was just not the case. Taut and wracked with anxiety, I became really angry; but when I saw her own distress, and the tears in her eyes, I was immediately contrite. Then she told me, but she told me as if it was her fault, and as though she was letting me down: I felt terrible in those minutes, André!

‘She had hepatitis, obviously as a kickback from the malaria she had in Liberia. My mother had taken Francesca to her own doctor, who was unsure, but knowing where she had been during the past year, he advised her to go for tests at the Tropical Diseases Hospital in London. Greatly concerned, my mother took Francesca to London and the hospital. There they took tests and confirmed hepatitis; she was then told that she should stay in the hospital and be treated with daily intravenous doses of B12 for ten days, after which she should rest and remain under their observation for a further week or so.

‘My poor, dearest Francesca: she panicked at the thought of not being ready to fly to Las Palmas to meet me, so she told the doctor who had attended her at the Tropical Diseases Hospital that she must fly to Las Palmas in the next day or so to meet her husband, and from there go on to Rome, where she knew she could get treatment. The doctors were not happy with this arrangement, but Francesca was quite determined. In the end they gave her some large B12 capsules to take until she could be hospitalised, but warned that her situation could become serious, especially if she delayed. In her loyalty and love for me, my misguided darling was only partially honest with my mother about telling her what the disease was, and said that she had to take these B12 capsules every day, and needed to rest up as much

as possible until she'd heard from me and could fly; she went further in asking my mother not to worry me with this "minor setback", as I was dealing with some awkward problems in Liberia. About ten days later, I rang from Monrovia on my last evening, and said that I should be in Las Palmas late the next day, or the following morning, depending on the connections.

'I looked at her, and my love welled up, my petty anger a thing of the past. What had I done to be blessed with so pure a love? For in those moments I saw her as the girl I had first met at Kibena, and not as the even more beautiful woman she had become. From that very first meeting I knew her as my other half, and loved her with all my heart; she came to me then, vulnerable and alive with the spirit of eternal youth, a touch of magic that she never lost, not even in the more beautiful woman she had become. What else could I do? I took her in my arms; but gently, so gently, for I feared to lose her, to crush her in my ardour. I phoned the office to have our meals brought up to us. After which I helped her to wash, for she was quite weak; then soothed her to sleep. My God, I can never forget her dark hair spilt about the pillow, framing her lovely face as she lay on our hotel bed. As for me, my heart was cracking. What was my best course of action? We couldn't stay in the Canary Isles; besides I had heard that their medical was fairly rudimentary. I turned the lights down, got up quietly and went downstairs.

'I asked for the hotel manager, whom I found to be very helpful, and genuinely sympathetic for the beautiful lady who was so sick. To be brief: it was of course too late to contact the airline, but the manager rang them first thing the next morning and, at some expense, we changed our two seats on the 1330 hours plane to Rome to First Class; this would give Francesca much more comfort, and seats that could extend to form the next best thing to a bed. I then asked if I could telephone a number in Naples; but this was not possible, for they had no telephonic links to most of Europe: the Canary Islands had not yet been invaded by the ills of technology, and still had a delightfully relaxed pace of life.

'So we flew in comfort to Rome that afternoon, but Francesca was now so weak that she stumbled on the tarmac, and would have fallen without my arm about her. When boarding the aircraft

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I helped her up the steps, but with a smiling discretion, for they could have refused her the flight had they thought they could be saddled with an invalid. However, with her winning smile and my assistance, we made it. During the flight I made her as comfortable as possible, lying almost flat with a blanket over her, underneath which we held hands most of the time. I was desperately afraid for her as I looked ahead to the soulless crowds at Rome Airport. Somehow I had to get her to a hospital.

‘When we were airborne, I put my problem to the stewardess: thank God I did, for she took it right out of my hands. Radioing ahead, the Captain arranged for an ambulance to meet the aircraft after it had landed; she then told me that Francesca should not be flying at all, and that I was “very naughty” bringing her on board. However, with a few embellishments I explained the situation to her; when she understood that this was an urgent affair of the heart, her reaction softened, and she became the soul of cooperation. Perhaps it helped being in First Class, where one is regarded more as an individual, and not just another sardine in a can.

‘Thereafter, everything ran smoothly: an ambulance was driven up to the plane at the airport, and Francesca and I were taken to a hospital on the outskirts of Rome. I had little previous experience of hospitals, but this was spotless and well run. When the ambulance drew up, I had to skip out of the way while they lifted Francesca out and put her on a soft-tyred trolley. Within seconds an orderly and a nurse appeared and wheeled her into a lift, along corridors at silent speed until, almost without warning, they swung into a ward, with myself trailing behind, unnoticed like an invisible ghost. With an efficiency born of long practice, two ward nurses appeared, and in a remarkably short time Francesca was in a bed between clean white sheets. The flight had exhausted her, and she looked very pale, but her eyes were wonderfully expressive as she held my hand. I gave the attending doctor Francesca’s letter from the Tropical Diseases Hospital, which they had given her before she had left them. He understood, nodded at me, and in a very short time she was on an intravenous B12 drip.

‘I sat beside her with a breaking heart. Our closeness and my concern were so apparent that they allowed me to remain; which I

did, lying on the floor next to my loved one that night; but not for long: when the night matron came on duty, seeing us together, her heart was touched, and she had Francesca moved to a private room, with a second bed which I could use. There was a telephone there, which I used to ring Francesca's parents in Naples. I got Helen, who said she'd be with us the following morning, but made no mention of Giovanni: I felt uneasy, but said nothing.

'Francesca was asleep when Helen arrived the next morning to see her, which was just as well, for her normal good spirits were absent; she was distraite and slightly stunned, obviously trying to hide some disruptive shock in her life. I was concerned for her, but primarily fearful for Francesca's state of mind when I woke her and she saw for herself. I asked Helen what was wrong, what had happened. She looked at me, her eyes strangely empty of feeling, then told me quite coolly that Giovanni had died a month ago. She suspected, even back at Kibena, what was confirmed when they had flown to Nairobi for certain tests: it had been cancer; a fairly slow-moving cancer, but a killer just the same. He was told that to get the best treatment available at the time he would have to go to London. Giovanni refused on the grounds of costs, both living and treatment. "In any case," he had said, "it might extend my life a little, but it won't save it." He had insisted that we were not told, either when they were in Nairobi, or later... He loved Francesca too much, and saw no good reason to burden us unnecessarily, especially in view of the difficulties he knew we were experiencing in Liberia.

'I was deeply touched by Giovanni's unselfishness; he was a gentle man in all the right ways, and I was very fond of him. But while Francesca was still sleeping I had to speak to Helen. I pulled up a chair and made her sit down facing me, before gently questioning my poor mother-in-law on Giovanni's illness, relating events in general, and what plans did she have for her future. In three nutshells it came to this: thankfully, Giovanni had not suffered much since Kibena and Nairobi; only near his end, his last ten days or so, when Helen had taken him into hospital, had the pain become intense. There was nothing the doctors could do except put him on to morphine. He was nursed and cared for, and

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Helen came and sat by him every day until, in his drugged state, he died mercifully in his sleep shortly after midnight.

‘About a month before Giovanni’s death, Helen’s elder sister came out from England to help. She was practical and firm, and had quietly taken over the running of the household, and of Helen. She knew her sister, and without appearing to interfere had anticipated the practical results of Giovanni’s pending death, and its impact on her sister in both the short and the long term. Her arrival was a true blessing at such a time, for while Helen was a good mother, she had loved and depended on Giovanni so much as to be quite unable to cope without him.

‘All this her sister knew, and Helen relied on her more and more, much as she had when they were children. The decision was to sell the house and, when finalised, Helen would return to England with her widowed sister, and stay with her near Oxford as long as she wished. With the sale of their house and Giovanni’s saving on expensive treatment, Helen would have sufficient money on which to live. The house sold almost immediately, and they were merely waiting for the completion of the legal transfer before leaving. I never asked, but it was now plain why Giovanni had sold the garage he had originally bought with the house.

‘Francesca was showing signs of waking, so very quickly I begged Helen to appear as calm and as normal as possible; I also thought it better if she left it to me to tell Francesca about her father’s death, meanwhile to act naturally until I felt that she had recovered some strength. This request must have seemed strange, but in fact Helen looked relieved; which puzzled me a little at the time, for while Francesca had always been closer to her father than to her mother, when together they had never showed any signs of incompatibility. Later on I came to understand Helen’s reaction, since I came close to treading a similar road myself: the price in suffering from the loss of a total commitment, a complete and wholehearted love. Helen was a poor soul, alone and lost in the wilderness of the world, so distant that not even her daughter meant much to her. Helen’s bond with Francesca had effectively snapped after the death of Giovanni; in fact the very presence of Francesca was a painful reminder of the past, of Giovanni and of their three lives together.

‘I got up and took Francesca in my arms, kissed her, and told her that her mother was here. “I know,” she said quietly. “I heard you talking to her. You mustn’t worry; I know my mother almost as I know myself. Let her come to me. I’ll explain later.” I lifted her up on a padding of pillows, sat in an easy chair in the corner, and left the two of them together.

‘This meeting between mother and daughter was strained; Helen tried to be natural, to say and ask all that one would expect; but it fell flat; there was no life in her voice, no warmth that I could discern. They were like two strangers. Francesca did her best, but she was still weak, and could scarcely sustain the strain. After barely ten minutes she looked despairingly towards me; but at that moment Helen got up from the chair next to the bed, leant over and kissed Francesca on the cheek, saying, “Goodbye, my darling, goodbye.” We both knew that this was a final “goodbye”, that Helen would not again seek her daughter’s company. It was simply too much for her.

‘Although Francesca had been only dimly awake, she knew from my quiet conversation with Helen, Giovanni’s absence, and from her mother’s own stilted manner and her final goodbye kiss, that something was badly wrong – that her father had died. After Helen had left, I turned to my now poor weeping Francesca, drying her eyes and comforting her as best I could. She clung to me, and I felt her weakness as the tears rolled helplessly down her cheeks. I had never seen my darling in such a terrible state before. At length she stopped, and I knew that her tears had flowed as much from her frailty as from her father’s death. She had always been deeply attached to her father; I hoped our love for each other would be enough to strengthen her over this loss, which had struck her at such a low ebb.

‘She lay quietly for a while, her head resting in the crook of my arm. Then she pulled herself away so that she could look at me, and said, “My own dearest Hugh, I’ve been very wicked; I should have stayed in that big Tropical Diseases Hospital in London; had I done so I’d have been quite well by now, and not be the burden I am. It would have been a bit awkward, but your mother could have explained the situation when you phoned from Spain. Now... now I don’t know; I feel so drained.”

“Listen, my darling; you’ve only been on this B12 drip for a night. I’ve had this before,” I lied optimistically. “Give it a week, and you’ll feel quite different, and much stronger.”

She looked at me, slightly askance with a naughty glint in her eyes. “Hugh, that was a whopper! You’ve never had hepatitis in your life; you’re trying to encourage me, so I’ll forgive you this time!”

“We-ll,” I replied, inwardly delighted to see even a glimpse of that sparkle in her eyes and manner, “I just wanted to see your lovely smile again; but I know a great deal about it, and I know you’ll get better and be your lovely self again; that is,” I added quizzically, “assuming you still love me, and want to live with this poor man. We do make a great team though!”

“Now *you’re* being wicked,” she replied, looking at me severely with her deep blue eyes, eyes so wonderfully clear and expressive that I carry their light within me to this very day.

‘Where did her beauty begin and end? Certainly it did not come from her face and body alone, for these were slightly flawed, as nearly all of us are flawed to a greater or lesser extent. But this was a rhetorical question which I never tired of asking myself, for the real answer lay within Francesca herself; she who had been blessed with eyes that shone so clearly, they could only have been the very mirror of her soul; which is of course where true beauty always springs, from the light within us. Even when she was ill and weak, that loveliness was still there. I never understood why some could not see in her what I saw and loved.’

Hugh paused, and said, ‘Tell me, André, do you think my thoughts nought but foolish dreams, born of an over-romantic nature, one that nurses its memories until they grow out of all proportion to the reality from which they sprang?’

‘Not in your case,’ André replied, deeply touched. ‘In many, yes, for some are, or grow to be, in love with love; and who can blame them, for it is their lack that leaves a vacuum that must be filled. But you, my friend... no, never; you’re far too balanced to be, perhaps, more than very slightly carried away on such ephemeral wings.’

‘Balanced? I wonder... Only perfection is balanced, and I am very imperfect. Nevertheless, I’m grateful for your opinion of me. But in Francesca I know; we lived closely together for ten years,

time enough to have shaken any falsities that may have lurked unseen between us. Sometimes, only rarely, it is given to a man and a woman to come together as two halves of a whole, a perfect union; we were blessed to have such a union. But I have learnt that to have such peace, such joy, such completeness is out of tune with this imperfect world; and so, in one way or another, it is torn away; yet it cannot be destroyed, though its loss came near to destroying me. None of us can be free from pain and loss to some extent; but if the lost was good, then later, when this life is over, the wholeness will come together and be complete again.

‘But listen; I must try not to take up too much of your time and patience. A week passed, and Francesca grew stronger; I breathed more than a sigh of relief, for I had been deeply worried. Now she had but one more day on the B12 drips, after which she would be allowed to walk around the hospital wing she was in, but with a strict regime of decreasing rest for another week. Francesca phoned Helen a couple of times; but she was distant, and each time found some excuse to cut the calls short. On the last brief conversation Francesca had with her mother, she gathered that the business over their house having been concluded, both she and her sister were due to leave for England in a few days’ time. Francesca had never even seen their home south of Naples, and neither she nor I saw her mother again, although I had taken her sister’s address and wrote a few times, but with only one very short reply.

‘Francesca and I talked about many matters to do with her family, and more to the point about our future: where we would go, and what we would do. Due to Francesca’s unexpected illness, our funds had been depleted far more than we had estimated, for we were not medically insured after Liberia, nor from England; we had in effect fallen between two stools. By now there could be options open to me in Kenya; I felt that for us both to travel there with so little behind us would be too risky, and suggested instead that Francesca stayed a while with my mother, while I went on my own to see just how good were the job openings for coffee or surveying. But here again I met strong opposition, and I recall so very clearly her saying to me, “No, Hugh, my darling; don’t even think of it. We only have each other now; my father’s died, and in

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effect my mother is lost to me. I'm terrified of losing you; we must stick together. I'll tell you what," she said impishly, snuggling down in her bed, "we'll both think better with cool heads: why don't you go out and get us ice creams? By the time you get back I'll have thought of something."

'My heart twisted up inside me as I saw her lying there. She was irresistible to me, and knew it, the minx! Mind you, to be honest, the reverse was also true; but one of the golden lights in our wonderful relationship was that we never took advantage of each other's beguiling qualities. I took her face between my hands, and gently kissed her, after which I told her what a winsome witch she was. I crossed the room, picked up my jacket and turned to the door. For a moment I looked back at her: I tried to stop the tears creeping into my eyes, for I had never seen her look more lovely... or was it just my love for her shining back at me, or the interaction from both of us? At any rate, I hurried off, anxious to be back.

'As I was walking towards the hospital exit, something in my mind rang alarm bells. I stopped and thought, but its warning was so faint, so intangible, that I was inclined to ignore it; and then it was gone. Perhaps it had been the way Francesca had looked at me, her expression, her eyes? I couldn't tell; but there had been a message, a premonition of sorts. Whatever it was had not come from Francesca's will, of that I was quite certain. Then I thought I was just being foolish, overreacting to the days of stress and worry, along with a kickback from Liberia. Besides, what could go wrong in the short time it would take me to walk to the ice-cream parlour, not much more than three hundred metres along the road, then round a corner.

'I pulled myself together, pushed the swing door open – it being the nearest exit to the new wing – and strode out into the torrid blast of an Italian midsummer. It was hotter than I had known it when I had gone out before, and the road was relatively quiet... *Mad dogs and Englishmen!* I thought; but at least the heat was dry, bone dry. I couldn't possibly bring back two ice creams in this heat; I'd have to get a small block wrapped in newspaper, and hurry back with that. Turning the corner I found the air-conditioned ice-cream parlour, full of Italian workmen, along

with some nurses from the hospital. It was crowded, but cool, and I joined the line as it shuffled forward.

‘Finally I reached the glass-topped counter. I remember taking out a 50 lire note to pay for the block I had in mind, when I heard first a huge blast of wind outside, so strong that the building itself shook slightly. A brief lull, and then a shout of “*Earthquake!*” as the ground beneath my feet shook, and the walls of the parlour seemed to sway. I grabbed my wrapped ice cream and made a dive for the door onto the street; but others in there had the same idea – to get out into the open! I was at the tail end of the scrimmage, fighting my way towards the glass door.

‘At last I broke free, together with my now mangled ice cream. I sprinted to the corner of the main road on which the hospital stood. My overriding fear was for Francesca, particularly so in view of the vague premonition I had felt near the swing door. As the road undulated under my feet, cracking and shooting out riven streamers, I peered towards where the hospital stood: the main body of the building was intact. The new wing in which Francesca lay had been built at the far end of the hospital, which I could not see at that moment.

‘Then I saw, and was struck by a cold fist of fear in the pit of my stomach, for ahead of me billowed a low cloud of dust over where the new wing should have been!

‘I ran on, dimly aware as I strode the cracks, that the road had steadied and was no longer moving under my feet: the brief spasm brought on by a shift in tectonic plates had ceased; the world was returning to normal. Short and sharp, but the damage caused by this brief earthquake had been savagely destructive. I ran on to where the new wing of the hospital had been – *had* been! Now there was only a pile of cracked and broken concrete beams, glass and rubble, lying in a great irregular hump. Heavy, choking dust thickened the air, while over this awful desolation there lay a terrible silence, a silence without and within.

‘I would hunt... I would tear the pile apart until I found my love, the most wonderful love in the world; the only and the most beautiful love I could ever have, or dreamed of having. But nothing, not even a cat, could have survived in those tons of rubble. I knew inside me that Francesca had been taken from me,

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that she was dead, her body torn and disfigured somewhere in that pile. Stunned, I didn't know what to do, for I too was dead inside. Dazed, I looked down; the ice cream was still in my hand, dripping – I opened my palm and let it fall to the ground.'

Fifteen: **Beyond the Rainbow**

André felt desperately sorry for Hugh, whose eyes were drifting out of focus as he spoke, his head drooping slightly, torturing himself through his vivid memories, as he visualised yet again the ever-living pattern of events so far away in time and distance; even without the physical touch, Francesca and the past were almost as clear to him now as they had been when they were together. He looked at André, the tears creeping down his seamed face.

‘Don’t say it, my friend,’ Hugh cut in, just as André was about to speak. ‘If you will bear with me a little longer, I need to tell you how events fell after this terrible loss.’

‘I understand only too well,’ André replied with feeling, ‘for I too have loved and lost, if not as violently or as tragically as yourself. You need to tell a close friend, or one whom you have never met before, and will not meet again. You do me an honour by telling me of your past with Francesca. By the way, was this earthquake very localised, and did it do much damage elsewhere?’

‘In answer to your question: I was in such a state of shock, my mind concentrating on the new wing to the hospital, which lay in ruins, that I paid scant attention to anything beyond. However, I was told later that the earthquake was fairly localised, and that not more than a few streets and buildings had been affected. Some roads were badly cracked, the one passing the hospital in particular; I understood, too, that several buildings were damaged, but only the new wing to the hospital actually fell: it must have been built on a very slender budget... As to the other matter, André, I feel rather that you are doing me a great kindness by listening to my story with such patience; I know you understand: I can feel it, even though you make few comments. But I must get on.

‘I stood in the road, half paralysed with shock and loss as I faced the pile of twisted girders, cracked beams and rubble. I

wondered dimly why only this part of the hospital had fallen under the earthquake's shocks, when the older and much larger section still stood, apparently undamaged save for a jagged scar where the new structure had joined with the old: a passage door swinging in space, leading nowhere; a rectangular hole which had been the flanking wall to an operating theatre; and there an empty bed standing lopsided with one of its legs suspended in space. I don't know how long I stood there; not long I think, for a crowd soon gathered, and filled the air with wails and cries. Then I heard jangling bells as a fire engine turned the corner at the end of the street, roaring its way to the scene of the catastrophe, soon followed by an ambulance and three police cars.

'I went up to the senior officer, and in broken Italian tried to explain my situation; that my beautiful wife had been in there when the building had collapsed. I heard my voice calling as from a distance, uttering words – words that fell clumsily from my lost soul! But what did they mean? Nothing! They could not bring back my Francesca, nor any of those who had been in this disaster wing. I knew I must stop or I'd break. The officer listened sympathetically, but not for long as he had to attend to the swelling crowd. While I was talking to him his eyes were sweeping over the scene of devastation, and just before he moved off he turned to me and waved his hands across each other, in an internationally understood gesture of negation, signifying very little hope, if any.

'I knew it; but even the smallest shred of hope to hang on to was something, so I stayed and watched as cranes and loading trucks drove up. But I could wait no longer; climbing on to the pile of concrete slabs and rubble, I started heaving aside whatever I could lift, hoping to find some air vent leading to a hollow space inside the pile. Very soon I was joined by other men, strongly built working men with sun-lined faces and broad horny hands. My hands and wrists were soon torn and bleeding from shards of glass, jagged steel and the rough edges of broken prestressed concrete. Time passed; as some men left, others took their places. The pile was gradually being eaten away by these combined human efforts, while the crane and the two dumper trucks were there, lifting, loading and carrying off all that we were heaving aside from the pile.

‘I worked on, exhausted, my back breaking from the unnatural strain. At length one kindly workman took me by the arm, and pointed that I should go and sit down and rest awhile; he also offered me a pair of rough old gloves which I could use when I started again. He was right, I was finished. While resting and watching the others at work, I heard one of them call out: the first body.

‘Heedless of my exhaustion, I leapt to my feet and joined those who were clearing a way around the crushed and bloody remains of a nurse. We had obviously reached a level where there would be more bodies, and I groaned at the thought of the truckloads of rubble that had been carried off, all of which had lain on my darling Francesca. My legs would hardly hold me up, and I had to sit a while longer, but I watched keenly as from time to time more bodies were exposed. A kind policeman brought me a flask of lukewarm tea, for I was dehydrated by the heat and the heavy work, and close to passing out.

‘Dusk was beginning to fall, and two giant searchlights were turned on, lighting the whole scene rather better than by day; the electric lights reflected back and inwards, so that even the shadowed areas between the light-coloured cement blocks shone dully. A huge Italian lifted a large block, hurling it down to the foot of the pile of rubble. There, in the space he had cleared, I saw a hand and wrist, a woman’s left hand. I had seen several similar sights as trapped bodies were revealed, and there was no good reason why I should be able to pick out one mutilated limb from another; but somehow this was different. I didn’t stop to question why this should be so, but got up stiffly and clambered up the greatly reduced height of rubble, stumbling and sliding on my weakened legs; kneeling and lying as best I could, I saw at once that this was Francesca’s hand. She was dead, but I bent and kissed the cold flesh of my darling, and while doing so I slipped the undamaged wedding ring off her hand, hoping that nobody had noticed my action, for to be caught robbing the dead was a terrible thing; but the idea of someone else taking it was too great a risk: we had chosen that ring together, and she had loved the engraved edelweiss on its surface.’

Hugh fumbled in his jacket pocket and brought out a small lovingly polished wooden box; he had lined the inside with some padding overlain with crimson watered silk. Inside and out it was a beautiful piece of work, yet wrought on from something quite poor.

'This is Francesca's wedding ring, André; it is all I have of hers,' he said simply. 'All our possessions were with us in the hospital, but in the earthquake and the collapse of the new wing everything was lost. I had only our money in the clothes I was wearing, and then Francesca's ring came back to me.'

André took the ring and examined it carefully: it was indeed a beautiful ring, in nine-carat gold for hardness; almost a small signet ring, but with an exquisitely engraved edelweiss on its plain. With a lump in his throat, he silently handed it back to Hugh. What could one say to a man who was telling you his story, sharing his deepest memories, and then offer to see and hold the single most precious thing he had in the world?

Hugh put the ring back into its box, and the box into his pocket. 'I think,' he said meditatively, 'that from what little you were able to tell me, along with what I knew about him from West Africa, that perhaps Henry Curtis's love for his wife could have been comparable to ours. At any rate I feel it was so, and at least he was spared old age. It was nearly forty years ago that Francesca died, and I have been in Patagonia for more than thirty-six of those years, yet my memory of her is alive within me. You told me earlier that the Tibetan Buddhists reputedly believe that the human mind is unable to retain clearly the living memory of anyone for longer than five years; they remember, but without the sting, or the wish to recall except in passive harmony.'

'Anyway, after that I seemed to live in a half-world, numbed, neither knowing nor caring what was to follow in my life. With several others, Francesca's body was first laid out on a stretcher, with a rough sheet pulled over each of them. I remember lifting the sheet and looking at my loved one's face, for in that heat each body had to be quickly identified before being taken away for burial or cremation. Although her hips and stomach had been crushed, her features were almost untouched, and I saw in her face a strange peace, and I wondered, even though she had been

unaware at the time, if some intuitive premonition had not risen to the surface just before the earthquake.

‘Soon all the bodies were taken away in ambulances, and here my memory is scattered. The next thing I recall was being at a Requiem Mass for the thirteen dead; I had brought with me a single red rose to put on to Francesca’s coffin... It was all I could do, for she had been the flower of my life. I could not bear to think of her body corrupting in some huge graveyard, so I asked that she be cremated. I waited, then carried the box and scattered her ashes under a magnificent tree in a park where I had been before, not far from the hospital in which she and many others had died. The tree would live on: she would have liked that.

‘The Italian Government was magnificent, for none of the living relatives of those who had been killed had any expenses to bear; the funerals and burials were free, and in my case they even put me into a comfortable hotel, where I could stay for a week at their expense after the Requiem Mass.

‘Fortunately I had kept our traveller’s cheques in an inside pocket of my jacket: US \$2,800, or about £1,000 sterling at that time. I had to keep moving, wandering here and there, often with no purpose other than to tire my body. One day I took a long bus ride from Rome via Naples to Cosenza in the south, close to the coastline and the Tyrrhenian Sea, and in the lee of some hills. I don’t know why I took this trip, except I knew I had to get away from Rome and reach for the peace in the poorer south. Here I found some semblance of calm. I stayed in a modest pensione; but still I wandered, and the next morning I took a bus across the isthmus to Rossano. There I walked around the fishing port, then restlessly, north-east on the coastal road enclosing the Gulf of Taranto. Every hour or so an old and brightly coloured bus ground its way past me on its way to Taranto; I caught one, and rode on it for about half an hour, alighting on an inner compulsion near some beached fishing boats.

‘Although unmarked on many maps, around this large bay were occasional small villages, like a loosely strung string of pearls around the instep of Italy’s foot; usually with several fishing boats, most out in the bay, but with some pulled up the beach above the waterline for caulking or repairs. I sat on the sand near one such

fishing boat, and watched as these hardy sailors went about their work. My Italian was not good enough to be able to converse freely; but they were friendly, and as I showed interest in what they were doing, before long they waved me over for a closer look. Most of them were short, broadly built men, with deeply seamed weather-beaten faces; they had large and callused hands from years of holding running sea-soaked ropes, and were absolute masters of anything to do with their boats and fishing. In spite of my unstable state of mind, I was deeply impressed by these men, who were as steady as the rise and fall of the tides, although being bottled-in Mediterranean tides were slight.

‘At length I rose, thanked them in my limited Italian for letting me watch them at work, and walked up the sloping beach to the small village. To my right I heard the higher pitched voices of children, and I was drawn towards the sound of their laughter. Clambering up a short embankment I saw beneath me a fast-flowing, deep and foully polluted watercourse carrying industrial waste and unwanted chemicals, its surface covered with streamers of foam. This water-borne waste spewed from a tunnel, then rushed into an open channel for about fifty metres, before being sucked away into another enclosed tunnel on its passage out to sea. Two things struck me as I looked at this engineering monstrosity: the sharp, toxic smell that wafted this way and that, gusting by the light wind in the partially enclosed area of the open watercourse, and a risk to any child; for while there was a footpath on the other side, there was no railing to act as a barrier, nor for that matter on the side on which I stood. The other was that because of the sheer torrent of water and filth, this flow must have come from some inland town, and I supposed that the village had not the funds to join these two large tunnels.

‘On the footpath were several children with satchels on their backs, running and playing along the footpath, which climbed up and away to the village and a cluster of small houses on the far side. Running among them, with scant notice being paid to it, was a scraggy, half-Alsatian stray, loping close to a young girl of about ten years of age; it was known, I later discovered, to many locals as a miserable cringing cur, which often received more kicks than scraps of food. At first I didn’t know how the children stood the

smell, nor at first why they went home that way for lunch; then I realised that down at their level on the footpath, the stench would only rarely assail them as strongly as it did me, for I was standing on the top of the embankment, about seven metres above them and more directly in the path of the rising toxic fumes. I learned later that in spite of this route being banned by both school and parents, it was sometimes dared by the children as a short cut between school and homes.

‘Upstream, near the tunnel mouth, the footpath narrowed before climbing up and away to the village beyond. The children must have been used to this, for although they only infrequently went this way, they knew it well enough. I recalled how intuition had guided me to climb this mound just as they were running the gauntlet! I began to climb down my side of the embankment, watching as the children neared the tunnel mouth from which the polluted water spewed into the open gully, and where they began to scramble up the short sharp slope. At the tail end were two children and the stray dog; the girl was in front, followed by a slightly older stocky boy, nudging to get past her to catch up with his friends halfway up the embankment path. I had noticed her before as the only child who showed any thought for the dog.

‘He pushed past the girl, but unwittingly drove her perilously close to the edge of the fast-flowing water. The boy ran on, unaware of her danger behind him. Meanwhile I saw her teetering on the edge, her arms flailed briefly in a vain attempt to keep her balance; but she had been nudged aside too heavily and too near the edge of the gully.

‘In such emergencies, our minds often see such scenes in slow motion, and this is how it was to me: time slowed. The young girl had lost her balance beyond any hope of recovery; she knew, and perhaps by chance she turned despairingly towards me as I was clambering down the opposite embankment. I shuddered, hesitating momentarily in the appalling stench, and at the sight of so much swirling filth and pollution... yet in that drawn-out moment, the girl’s face as she looked towards me was that of Francesca! And then she was gone, plunging into the turgid maelstrom.

‘With that single look any disgust and nausea I may have felt

were swept aside. Throwing caution to the winds, I nearly rolled down the embankment in my haste; at the same time, out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of a shadow flash by, leaping far out into the turgid swirl of poisoned waters ahead of the girl. The courageous animal turned and swam straight to the struggling child, gripped her collar between his teeth, and strove to swim his way against the flow and towards the slippery bricked bank.

‘By this time I was sprinting down the path on my side: I had to catch up and pass both girl and dog before the force of the fast-flowing stream swept them into the southern tunnel. No one could have swum against the flow, nor could any have stayed conscious for long in those toxic fumes. I passed them, barely five metres before the entrance to the tunnel, and a moment later leapt into the heavily swirling mess of foam and sharply stinking water. It was about a metre in depth, and the walls so slimy that it was impossible to get any grip with hands or feet; besides which the waist-high current was itself powerful enough to sweep any man off his feet.

‘I was just in time, for as I was being driven on by the flow, both girl and dog slammed into me. The dog was still paddling with all his strength, but the girl was barely conscious from the fumes and the shock, or both. With my right arm I caught her round the waist, trying to keep her head up; at the same time I had the dog under my left arm. Glancing behind, I saw that we were almost into the tunnel mouth: in desperation I lunged to my left and managed to catch a fingertip hold of the metal rim on the edge of the tunnel. I tried to pull us into the side where the strong flow of polluted water was slightly weaker; but in doing so, my left arm had straightened, and the brave dog slid from my grasp to be swept down the tunnel, head up and swimming frantically to get back to us: it was a hopeless battle, and very soon, with a pathetic look in his eyes, he stopped swimming, howled once with a forlorn haunting echo, and gave himself up to the rush of water and filth.

‘It was impossible to keep my tenuous fingertip grip on the metal rim of the tunnel with one hand. Holding the girl tightly, I turned to face the slimy wall, which enabled me to use both hands and fingers, and at the same time press the child between my arms

and chest and against where the bank joined the outflowing tunnel; even so, with the very strong pressures of foam, sludge and water flow, it was not a position I could have held for long. The girl in my arms was conscious, and two dark-blue eyes looked up at me through her straggled hair and the mess on her face.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ I said as soothingly as I could. ‘We’ll be rescued soon; but keep your head up.’ I don’t suppose she understood a word of what I was saying, but my tone helped, and I recognised the look of trust and reliance she gave me.

‘Just then a shadow passed over us, and I looked up to see two of the fishermen leaning over the edge of the bank. One had a length of rope coiled across his chest. These men were practical and tough, and I knew that in their hands we would be saved. A moment later the larger of the two men had coiled the rope around his shoulders, and braced himself to take the strain of his companion’s weight; the other man then slid down the rope until he reached us. I tried to pass him the child, but could not let go with my right hand. I need not have worried, they saw my predicament, and soon a strong arm had plucked the girl from my grasp and, carrying her, he climbed the rope with ease. After which I grasped the rope they threw down to me, and with their help was soon on dry land again; but both the girl and I were half-blinded, weak, choking and sick from the foul stench and toxic fumes.

‘Later there was a write-up on this incident in a local paper, and then another from the British *Daily Star* correspondent in Rome which made little mention of me, thinking no doubt that his readers’ interest and sympathy would be better aroused by the gallantry of the dog, Roky; after all, to have two heroes, one a human and the other a dog, would lessen the poignancy and impact of the story! Well, it was his business to assess the potential in any news; but in a small way it does indicate how facts are often passed over or misreported for a variety of motives, political or emotive. In fact I was glad to be left out: there had already been too much trouble and pain in my life, and I had no wish for any publicity that might well have linked Francesca’s death and my loss to the earthquake in Rome. Anyway, I have the *Daily Star* cutting with me.’

Saying which, Hugh dug in his pocket and pulled out his second treasure, for he felt that the flashing vision of Francesca in the girl's face was to him a link with his beloved.

André read the short article, and passed it back. 'You've had a tough time, Hugh; but I cannot understand why you thought of yourself as a coward when you saw this girl beginning to fall into the canal; you acted very bravely.'

'Well,' Hugh replied, 'perhaps I only sprang into action when I saw Francesca's face in that of the girl. Although I cannot see myself reacting any differently had Francesca not appeared to me, but who knows? Pietro must have had some reason, even my slight pause; why else would he have called on me to go through this same awful experience again? It's a mystery, but I have loving letters from Anita – that was the girl's name – over many years.'

'Anyway,' Hugh went on, 'with no memory of these past events, for in a real sense the slate was wiped clean by my having to prove myself again. However, I should tell you that before I met Pietro, I remembered with absolute clarity everything that had occurred, with both the girl and the foul industrial waste in the gully, but most clearly the miracle that followed. However, having cleared my previous memory of this particular event, and its miraculous aftermath, I'm now struggling with a scattered memory of those previous events! It will come back to me, but what I do recall, so long ago in the southern instep of Italy, is a mixed and disjointed residue of feelings and thoughts.'

'Apart from these first-time events in the Gulf of Taranto, my memory is clear on my life with Francesca, and from the sum of my experiences and work during my long years of wandering here in Patagonia. It was only for the briefest of moments that the girl's face reflected that of Francesca's. Did I hesitate to act the first time? Or did I save the girl in much the same way that I have just related? I fear this may remain in shadow until my release from this life. Perhaps all that matters is that I passed the test. I'm sorry if what I have related, tied up with some of what follows, seems to be a muddle; it is not yet completely clear to me.'

'Afterwards, I found myself back with my donkey, when I had been on my way to the beach, I felt uplifted; the burdens and the loneliness from many years had fallen away. The scene where I

stood was as it had been when I met Pietro; in fact no time had passed. He was no longer there, but I was filled with a great joy, for I knew Francesca was waiting, and I knew we would be together quite soon. In spite of our great love, time had eroded some of my faith, had brought me to doubt myself and the future. Nonetheless, the trial exhausted me, which is why you found me in such a poor state when I knocked at your door a thousand years ago.'

'Tell me what brought the two seamen to you in the nick of time, and afterwards,' André said.

'Yes, well, apparently two of the girls turned back at the top of the embankment to see what had happened to their friend. I was of course wholly taken up with the girl who had fallen into the channel, so I was quite unaware of them, neither did I hear their call to the seamen on the beach. From where they were standing they could see both the seamen and my race against time and the fast-flowing water.

'The people of the village were marvellous; nothing was too much trouble; their gratitude was embarrassing. Initially of course I was primarily concerned for the girl, her eyes and her skin; my own were very painful, yet I was unaware of having opened them under the fouled and toxic waters, although it was impossible to avoid the splash and fumes. Anyway, after they had pulled me up the slimy wall of the drain, one of the seamen gathered up the child; then with the other seaman they rushed us down to the beach, literally throwing us into the cleansing sea water: I cannot describe the immediate relief from this rough-and-ready treatment. This was no time for modesty, and while they quickly stripped all the girl's clothes from her, I did the same, throwing my clothes onto the beach; and there we both bathed for a while, as naked as the day we were born!

'By now there was a small but growing crowd of adults and children on the beach. I saw my clothes being gathered up by one of the women, and called out as best I could, for my throat had been affected by the toxic fumes, to look after my wallet and the few possessions in my jacket pocket; gesticulating in sign language, the good woman waved back, and I knew that I'd not leave their village with any loss. Later, wrapped in large bathrobes,

Beyond the Rainbow

we were both taken in by them and cared for. The girl I saved was whisked off by her mother, and I was taken in by the same woman who had gathered up my clothes and shoes.

‘What else can I say! The people in the village were not impoverished, but they were certainly not well off; indeed, many were quite poor; but they helped each other, and so they took me in and helped me in my distress. A bath with some soothing lotion added, an old but warm dressing gown, and a bed in a small, simply furnished room. Shortly after, a very old doctor, plainly long retired, came to see me: an examination, a bottle of medicine for my throat, an anti-irritant cream for my face and the thin skin around my eyes, which he applied, and an injection of some drug to ensure I slept for about twelve hours; he ended his treatment with a wrinkled smile.

‘My last memory before I sank into the soft embrace of sleep was the warm, beaming face of my hostess as she bent over and tucked me up like a child. I was cared for with a simple love and generosity; and although the skin around my eyes, and in other tender parts of my body, aggravated and kept me in her care for nearly two days, her warmth, sincerity and detachment from worldly values, gave me the greatest ease and peace of mind since the loss to me of Francesca. She was wonderful, and yet I don’t even know her name! She was one of those rare angels on Earth who pass through the world, leaving a bright trail of star dust behind them.’

‘On the third day I got up, to find at the foot of the bed my clothes, washed, ironed and laid out ready for me to dress; even my shoes had been dried out, and then rejuvenated with repeated rubbing with wax polish; lastly there was a small pile of my personal possessions and my wallet which, like my shoes, had been cleaned and waxed, and its contents put back exactly as I had left them.

‘I felt very humble as I dressed and went down the narrow stairs to thank her. I found her laying the small kitchen table for breakfast, but only one place for myself. What could I do? I gave this widow, for that is what she had been for some years, a warm kiss, and insisted that she join me; trying at the same time to

thank her for her great kindness to me, a stranger. My Italian is not good, but I remember her reaction so well: first she wagged a finger at me like a naughty child, then told me in effect that no one in her house could be a stranger, and how could I think of myself as a stranger after having saved one of their children from a terrible death? She was gentle, but strong. I gave up, and we had breakfast together, after which I told her I must get back to Cosenza that day; but before I left I'd like to know that the girl I saved had recovered from her ordeal. She smiled at me, and told me that she would take me to her home.

'We walked a short distance in the cluster of cottages to one that was slightly larger. After knocking and being let in by the girl's mother, my hostess left me: it was with a curious mixture of loss and fulfilment that I watched her walk away and out of my life.

'The girl's mother was taller than my hostess, slender and with a youthful figure, barely into her thirties. At first she did not know quite what to say, so I broke the ice by saying that I could only stay a very short while as I had to catch the bus to Cosenza, but I was anxious about her daughter.

'That did it: she wept tears of joy, showering me with kisses, until it became a little embarrassing, and I almost wished I hadn't called, but had slipped away on the bus. Then the girl, hearing the noise, came into the small hallway. She was shy, poor soul, but she had recovered better than I had in the time. Her name was Anita, Anita Parodi, and she curtsied most gracefully to me. I said how pleased I was at seeing how well she looked after her unfortunate fall into the dirty water! But I had no wish to embarrass either mother and daughter by hanging around like some fairy godfather, so said that I must catch the bus which was due to pass by the village in about an hour.

'At that there was some consternation, the mother saying she had a letter for the driver, a friend of theirs, and would I wait a few moments while she got it ready: "You see," she said with an innocent smile, "Anita is anxious to walk with you, which would be good for her after her terrible accident and more than a day in bed; that is if you don't mind? Anyway, the bus is nearly always late."

'I told her I'd be delighted to have such an attractive escort,

which indeed I could see on close quarters, and without the dangers we had faced together less than three days ago. Her mother smiled, more relaxed now; it seemed clear to me at the time from whom Anita had inherited her attractiveness.

‘Presently all was ready, and Anita had in her dress pocket her mother’s letter for the driver. I saw the deep emotion in her mother’s eyes, so to save her feelings, and my own, I bade her a quick but warm farewell, and left with Anita.

‘As soon as the door was closed, and we had rounded a corner out of sight of their house, Anita overcame her shyness, looked up at me and said in all innocence, “You’re very brave; I love you,” and put her hand into mine. We walked on like this, saying little. I was deeply touched by this young girl I had saved in the channel, and it was hard for me to control the tears that were stinging my eyes. Since Francesca had died in the earthquake so near in time, I had shut myself away, holding only her memory close in my mind; nobody could ever take her unique place in my heart and life.

‘I knew I would have to emerge from my shell; but I was afraid, afraid of losing that incredible link we always had, afraid that our love might become tarnished or weakened, separated as we were by the great gulf between life and death. Weakened by my angelic hostess, now this lovely young girl had effortlessly broken through what remained of my flimsy shell; her pure and innocent love had swept aside the growing myth within me: I felt strangely free, no longer caught within myself. Francesca and I were as one; we would always be as two links in a chain. But now she was gone, and her link to mine was drifting in the mists of time, while I must live in this world until my own hour came, when our souls would come together again in the pure light of everlasting life.

‘I squeezed Anita’s hand, looked down at her and said, “Yes, and I love you too – truly.” Had she been older than her ten years, I would like to have said, “I only saved your life, but you saved my soul.” At any rate there was fused between us a very strong bond, one that still exists even today. Saving a life can be a heart-wrenching business; it certainly was in my case. As we approached the spot where we both knew the bus would stop if flagged down, we sat together on a flat rock and waited; we waited in perfect ease

in each other's company. She asked me if I'd write to her, to which I readily agreed, for I was rather dreading not seeing my lovely little lifeline again. She had her name and address all neatly written out on a slip of paper, which she thrust into my hand, and from there into my inside pocket.

'And what price language barriers? I had learnt some Italian from Francesca, but never having had to use it until we landed in Rome, I was very far from fluent. However, it was only later when I was alone on the bus that I realised there had been no language barriers between us, nor in fact from the time I had been taken in by my angelic hostess: communication barriers had simply fallen away! Later, when Anita and I corresponded in letters, she wrote mostly in English, laced with a scattering of Italian, for she was a quick learner; meanwhile I became more fluent in Italian.

'I cannot explain how it was, but I wondered at the magic that lay in this unique village, with some very special people. When I had to get on that bus and leave, it was with a feeling of leaving behind me a reality not of this world. I never wanted to go, and when I had left I wanted to return; but I knew I had to move on: such magic was not yet mine, and I had my link in Anita.

'We could hear the bus as it crawled round some sharp bends, at which sound Anita became quite distressed, knowing that very soon she would lose me. Indeed, we were both distressed, for I had no wish to say goodbye to my young friend; to miss her pure young love and her sweetly innocent outlook on life; such qualities are rare these days. She let go of my hand, and took her rosary from around her neck; this she wanted me to have, and to carry on my person always, and then, standing up, she put it round my own neck. I had nothing to give her; I drew her slight body to me and kissed her, running my hand through her soft hair. We were both in a dreadful state when the bus eventually drew up in a cloud of dust. In fact Anita only just remembered to give me her mother's letter for the driver.

'Poor Anita... She never forgot her terror of the foul stream, nor the wonder of my saving her. She also never forgot me, thereby showing herself to be a very unusual girl for her age – or any age, for that matter. Waving goodbye to her as the bus started off, seeing her forlorn little face with the tears streaming down

her cheeks, is a scene that will live with me always. Well, as I said earlier, we kept in touch by letter, even to this day. She's now a graceful married lady of just fifty with two children; she named the boy after me – which must look odd in Italian! One of the most wonderful things about Anita was that she never forgot, over the long years and the wide distances; I always knew she was there for me, as I was for her. In a way I cannot explain she stood in place of Francesca: the two were so alike! Even the lands in which we met had a similarity. I hope you can understand what I'm trying inadequately to express...'

'Yes, but I think there's more behind your words.'

'There are indeed; and you're shrewd, André. As I sit here recounting my past, I told you that Pietro said I must go back and relive this scene; I must overcome the fear which may have caused me to pause the first time on the polluted stream. Now I'm unsure as to which event was which; time has been juggled in my mind. Perhaps the two events were one and the same! At any rate, something happened to me since I met Pietro, for I am now free of a haunting fear of loss that I've carried for years: now there is no question of any eternal barriers between Francesca and me – the bond is sealed.

'Here is another strange idea; almost a rhetorical question: Do you suppose that Anita could be the daughter that Francesca and I would have had, had she been able to bear and give birth? From the first moment of knowing Anita, I felt a natural tie that has never left me. As time went by, I saw her ever more strongly in a chain of three – myself, Francesca and Anita. I cannot believe this stemmed from any distorted source of wishful thinking; indeed at first I would not accept it, even though Anita regarded me as her father! Oh, not in so many words, but from herself on our walk to the bus and after; then later from her letters, I began to see and accept that she was the second link, even though logic told me that such a thing was impossible. No mention was ever made of her natural father, the shadowy Mr Parodi who seemed not to exist. For years I wrestled with this compelling impression – that is until I met Pietro: indirectly, he revealed to me that links between Heaven and Earth, between life on two planes, can be far closer than is commonly supposed, and very tangible to some. As

for strong relationships: these are bound in spirit before ever they are bound on Earth.

‘Now I wonder at the miracle of enlightenment that Pietro has cast about me; now I know that Anita is my daughter, as she is Francesca’s. Anita has never mentioned her father on Earth, nor did I hear of a Mr Parodi while I was in the village; her mother, yes! But why be confused in the crude tangle of cold logic, when given the gift of a leap in truth through infinity?’

‘André, you are the only person to whom I’ve ever revealed my past, with all its fears and uncertainties. Some of what I’ve told you would be seen by most as delusions, even lunacy; but there are always men and women who, in the nature of their destiny, in their independently driven far-seeing thought, have stepped out of line, breaking with the accepted patterns of their day; at the least such people are always scorned at the time. In my case I was uncertain on two vital issues, and it was only when Pietro opened my eyes did the final pieces in my strange jigsaw fall into place: such in part are the contradictions when snared between the wonder of love and the tangle of our cold and limited logic. I don’t pretend to understand much of the how and why, but I do know. These are the vital chords in my life; the rest is unimportant. At least my years in Patagonia have been given to serving, and to give health and life. As the Zulus would say, “I have spoken”.

‘You have been very patient listening to me, André, and I do thank you; also for your hospitality and kindness. Tomorrow I must leave quietly with my donkey and return to being the Butterfly Man,’ Hugh concluded.

‘Yours is an extraordinary story,’ André replied, ‘even among those I knew who had a direct and personal contact with Pietro. Having heard it, perhaps I can see some things which from your current perspective as a direct participant may not as yet be quite as clear. For instance, from what you told me today, I drew a clear impression that the main purpose of Pietro’s intervention in your life was to bring you peace after years of anguish; first by revealing to you some of the truth underlying the love between yourself and Francesca, and then in the relationship between yourself, Francesca and Anita, along with some truths beyond this world.

‘Pietro had a profound effect on the lives of at least eleven

people; but to each one he was singular, his touch perfectly suited to the needs and the nature of the person concerned. Time may reveal more. I wonder where Pietro had been before he and Ruth were picked up by Henry Curtis in the slums of Rio de Janeiro? Perhaps elsewhere on Earth? Perhaps nowhere so tangible? I am still sorting out impressions I absorbed from when I was on the beach, and after, while others are still surfacing. It's not something I can force; they come when least expected; sometimes just in trickles, at others blurred, then again as clear as crystal. I don't know why I'm the recipient of so much about so many.'

'Each of us has a different destiny to follow,' replied Hugh; 'and I believe you underestimate your qualities. Perhaps your task is to record what you learn, then blend it into a book; I can think of no one better suited to tackle such a task.'

André and Hugh were strolling in the garden as the sun was dipping in the west, watching its filtered rays as they were diffused into a glowing red that spread across the evening sky. Something made both men turn: there, from the east and the sea, they saw a great white bird winging its way towards the sunset, its streamlined body and wings tinged with a roseate hue, as if aflame in the waning light of the sinking sun. The bird bore with it a magnetic beauty, a perfection in its graceful flight. As it passed overhead, they both felt that this glowing bird had been sent as a sign and a seal to the reality and truth of all they had seen and experienced. They watched as it flew inland, and until it was lost beyond their sight.

'You know, Hugh,' said André quietly, 'I'm sure that is the same bird that flew over the bluff at Paranagua; the same that Eric Blythe saw flying in from the sea into the setting sun, and, symbolically at least, linked with the mysterious disappearance of Jakes and Ruth from the beach; the same that bears Pietro's seal.'

'Paranagua – isn't that on the coast near Curitiba?'

'The very same,' replied André, 'around three thousand kilometres north of here. Isn't it wonderful? Perhaps there are more such angels winging their way around the world. Perhaps even he, and others, are heralds of far greater events to come,' he almost whispered.

Appendix One:
Crew and Passengers on MV *The Viking*

Appendix One: Crew and Passengers on MV The Viking

Crew:		
Officers:		
Captain James Vickery	English	Age about 58 years
First Mate William (Bill) Jakes	English	Age about 47 years
Second Mate Eric Blythe	Eng/Norw	Age about 35 years
Chief Engineer Gordon Mactavish	Scottish	Age about 48 years
Bo'sun Hamish Ferguson	Scottish	Age about 47 years
Engine Room:		
Donald McWhirter	Scottish	Age about 28 years
Gerry Cansick	English	Age about 24 years
Peter Jones (Electrician)	Welsh	Age about 25 years
Patrick Phelan	Irish	Age about 26 years
Gerald Naseby	English	Age about 29 years
Michael Morrison	English	Age about 23 years
Cook:		
Harry Shaw	English	Age about 46 years
Steward:		
Luis Romero (acting Medic)	Portuguese	Age about 30 years
Crew:		
Marcus Law (Carpenter)	Eng/Greek	Age about 27 years
George Bowen (Deputy Bo'sun)	English	Age about 31 years
John Patterson	Eng/Scots	Age about 34 years
John Trent	English	Age about 26 years
Archie Sinclair (good education)	English	Age about 22 years
Geraint Kennet	Welsh	Age about 24 years
Peter Cringle	Manx	Age about 29 years
Edward (Ted) Hudson	English	Age about 33 years
Louis Jardine	English	Age about 22 years
Boris Kanlewski	Russian	Age about 30 years
Fred Dawlish	English	Age about 19 years
Archie Wayland	English	Age about 21 years
Johnny Holbrook	English	Age about 23 years
Ian Douglas	Scots	Age about 23 years
Total = 27 crew		

Appendix One: Crew and Passengers on MV The Viking

Passengers:		
Henry Curtis (widower)	English	Age early 60s years
Pietro Crevelli	Italian	Age about 12 years
Ruth (unknown) (waif)	Italian?	Age about 8/9 years
Father Paulos (RC Priest)	Spanish	Age about 40+ years
Grace Geldart	S African	Age about 50 years
Jim Maitland (adventurer)	English	Age about 54 years
Total passengers = 6		
Total persons on board = 33		

Cargo off and on at Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) to Montevideo (Uruguay) = circa 1,120 miles (985.6 sea miles/knots) @ 15 knots = 2.74 days.

Montevideo to latitude 50 degrees south = circa 1,093 miles (961.8 sea miles/knots) @ 15 knots = 2.67 days.

The Viking never reached the port of Valparaiso (the port for Santiago in Chile).

Appendix Two
Maps







